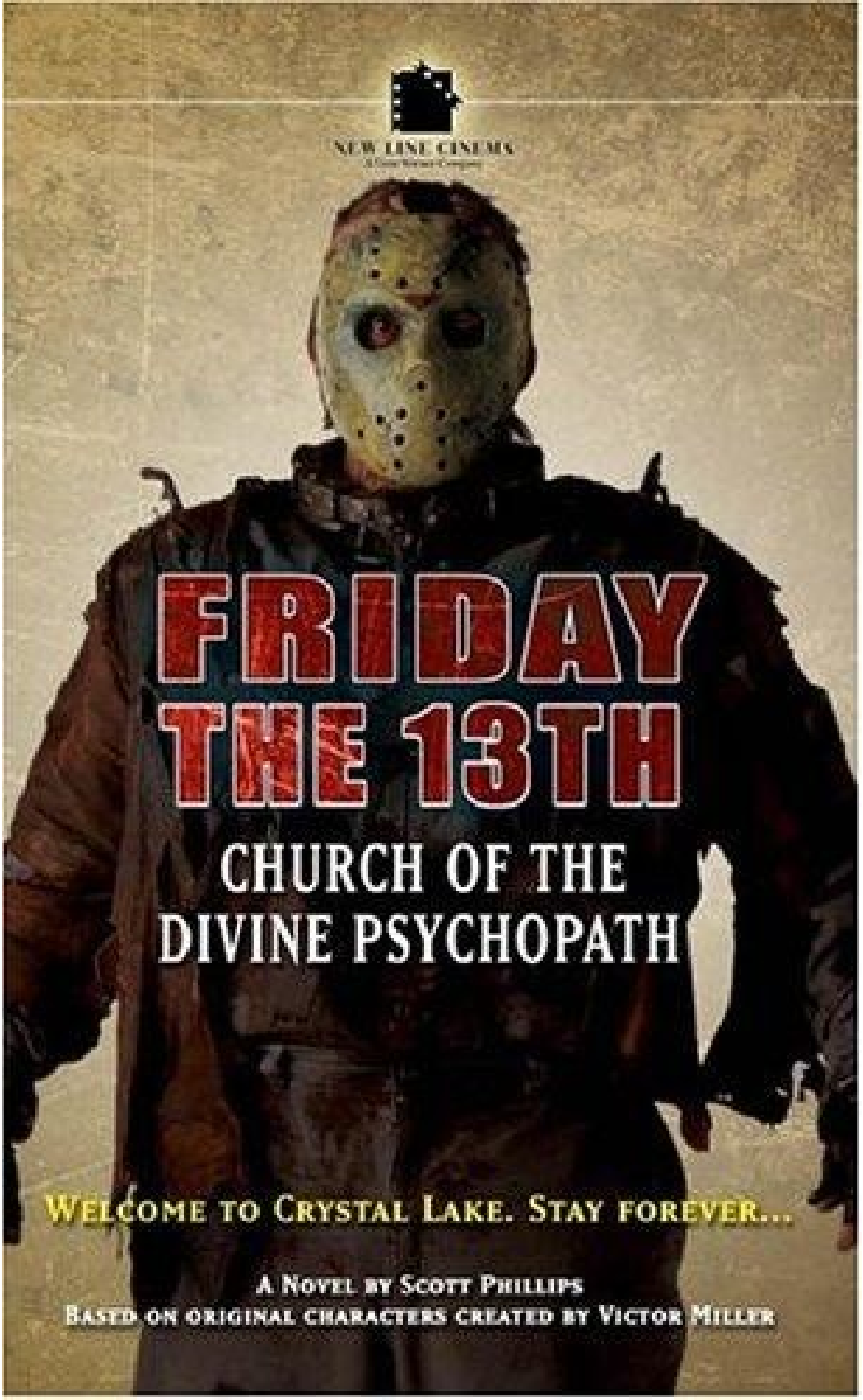
NEW LINE CINEMA
FRIDAY THE 13TH
CHURCH OF THE DIVINE PSYCHOPATH
WELCOME TO CRYSTAL LAKE. STAY FOREVER...
A NOVEL BY SCOTT PHILLIPS
BASED ON ORIGINAL CHARACTERS CREATED BY VICTOR MILLER

PROLOGUE

At the bottom of the lake, the corpse, anchored to the sediment on the lakebed by several concrete blocks, twirled slowly in the current. The ropes that bound the body were waterlogged and fraying, and one dead arm had come free, drifting upwards to point limply towards the surface and the sunlight.

Up above, a slight breeze urged a procession of gentle ripples across the surface of the lake, rolling ceaselessly towards the shore. A few birds spun overhead in easy circles. A squirrel scurried along the water's edge, ducking in and out of the grass. From somewhere, muffled voices could be heard. It was a warm spring day at Crystal Lake and the mutilated corpses of his previous victims had long since been cleared away.

Beneath the lake, the murderer rested, suspended in gloomy silence, eyes closed behind the battered hockey mask that obscured his dead face. Occasionally, a hungry fish would dart in to pick at his decomposing flesh, tearing away a meaty morsel. And every minute of every day, the ropes that held him there rotted a little, becoming more and more frail, loosening their hold on the corpse. Every minute of every day he slipped from their grasp a bit more, inching towards the surface of the lake.

How long had it been since the corpse of Jason Voorhees had been delivered back into the cold waters of Crystal Lake? Weeks? Years? Could the time be measured in butchered bodies and the spilling of blood? Voorhees's final victims had been just as foolish as those who died before them. They had heard the stories, of course. They knew why the place was called "Camp Blood".

But like so many others, they hadn't believed the tales or had thought that it couldn't happen to them.

The teenage girl had died first, died shrieking in terror, her breasts jiggling as the air was expelled from her lungs. Jason Voorhees had held her slender wrists clasped tightly in one huge hand, yanking her from the collapsed tent and hoisting her upwards until her bare feet left the ground. Her agonizing screams rose in pitch, accompanied by a loud popping sound, as her left arm was dislocated from the shoulder and wrenched from the socket.

Movement nearby caught Jason's attention. The boy was getting away, scrabbling backwards from the ruined tent and staring open-mouthed at his nude girlfriend, who thrashed back and forth like a rag doll in Jason's grasp. The boy was also buck naked, but he hadn't thought about reaching for his clothes when a machete blade ripped and slashed through the nylon wall of the tent. Too bad, too—he'd been tearing off one fine piece of ass before the psycho killer had interrupted

his good times. As he scrabbled backwards, the rocks and sand beneath him scraping the exposed flesh of his ass, he couldn't help but wish he had listened to his friends.

Stay away from Camp Blood.

The machete entered the girl's torso just above her left hip, glancing off the glistening bone and sinking deeply into the soft flesh of her belly. She gasped, painfully, as the tip of the blade punched through her back. She could feel her blood running down her thighs in thick, warm ribbons. Then Jason savagely worked the machete blade upwards, past her navel, the brutal slicing motion coming to a stop as the edge of the blade sawed into a rib. Something else was oozing out of the gaping wound. Before she died, the girl glanced down to see her steaming intestines spilling from the gash in her belly, sliding along in the blood to become entangled in her frantically kicking legs.

Jason Voorhees stared at the dying girl without emotion as her life stuttered and twitched to an unpleasant end. Whipping the corpse around like a child's toy, the killer looked past her, watching the teenage boy as he stumbled to his feet and began to run towards the lake. Effortlessly, Jason hurled the lifeless body of the girl into the bushes and gave chase, purposefully striding after the terrified teenage boy. The boy let out an awkward girlish squeal when he realized Jason was pursuing him. Hunting him. Foolishly, he splashed out into the water, as if he could find safety and refuge from the maniac. He yelped as he stepped on something sharp, then lost his balance and fell face-first into the lake. An instant later, he burst from the water, choking and gasping. He whirled back towards the shore... which was empty.

Jason Voorhees was nowhere to be seen. With spit dribbling down his chin, the frightened teenage boy stood trembling in the freezing water, staring wide-eyed at the shoreline. The guy was huge; no way could he have disappeared so fast.

Splashing, the boy spun to his left. Nothing. Back to the right. Still nothing. The moon was nearly full, casting a soft light over the scene. He should have been able to see him. The boy tried very, very hard to quell his shivering, not making a sound as he listened intently for some sign that the killer was still out there. After a moment, he slowly began wading back towards dry land, not letting himself blink, eyes flicking back and forth, as vigilant as someone who's had way too much to drink and then watched their girlfriend get sliced open like a strung-up hog could possibly be.

Stepping out of the water he paused, demurely holding his hands in front of his groin. Still no sign of Jason. Maybe the killer had got what he wanted with the girl's death. Maybe. Maybe not. Nervously, the boy walked back towards the demolished tent, carefully picking his way across the rocky shoreline. He noticed his foot was bleeding, probably

from whatever he stepped on in the lake. *Gonna need a tetanus shot for that...*

As he neared the tent, he saw the snarl of entrails splayed out across the shredded nylon and the expensive sleeping bags. Blood was everywhere. The boy's lower lip trembled as his eyes traced the trail of guts off into the underbrush, where Jason had flung the girl's corpse. He forced himself to move, gingerly following the ribbons of intestine. Her dead eyes stared up at him, blood pooling in one of the sockets. She didn't look so goddamn sexy anymore, not like she had at the Kittie concert where they'd met. Not like she had only moments earlier, when enjoying frantic, sweaty sex. He realized that he was still wearing the condom; gasping in dismay, he yanked it free and threw it into the bushes.

Then a hand clamped tightly around his neck. Thick fingers sank into the boy's throat, compressing his windpipe. His feet left the ground as Jason lifted him upwards. The boy struggled to twist his head, to see the killer, but the grip on his neck was too strong. Jason swung the machete with inhuman force. The blade sank into the boy's right side, just under the ribcage, and went clean through his spine. The lower half of his body—legs still kicking—swung away from the upper half as organs and more fleshy body parts spilled out onto the ground. Jason dropped the lifeless body atop the girl's in a sick parody of the position they'd been in when he'd caught them. Turning, the masked murderer stared at the lantern lights burning in the distance, at the old campground. There were others, but like so many times before it had ended abruptly. Like so many times before, someone had tricked Jason, been faster than him, and he had been killed, and his body sent back to the lake. Like so many times before. The body was never recovered. They'd missed it somehow, even with all their searching. And the ropes that held him were rotting. Animated by the current of the lake, the body of Jason Voorhees continued to turn in lazy circles, each rotation of the corpse causing the ropes to fray a little more. Above, a shadowy figure appeared, its image distorted by the motion of the waves.

The surface of the water stirred...

ONE

Kelly Mills steered her battered Honda Civic into the strip mall's parking lot. The car groaned uncomfortably at the use of the brake pedal. "Don't die. Don't die," she pleaded. Wrenching the wheel, she guided it into a parking space where it lurched to a halt, snapping her head forward. Something hissed beneath the hood and the car shuddered violently as the engine finally gave up.

Still holding the steering wheel, she looked at the recently washed, new-model SUV parked next to her. Her distorted reflection gazed back from the glistening chrome trim that ran the length of the vehicle. She sighed longingly. The Honda was older than she was. Her mother had squeezed a couple of hundred thousand miles out of the 1980 Civic before bestowing it upon Kelly; now it just felt like one more manifestation of the disdain her mother had for her. Maybe the mean old bitch was right. Why should someone like Kelly deserve anything nice, anyway?

Better things to think about, Kelly thought. She cocked the mirror towards herself and checked out the reflection. Not bad, not bad at all—just the right amount of eyeliner to bring out the flecks of gold in her green eyes. She had never believed in the rule that said dark eyeliner and dark lipstick don't play well together, but this time she had skipped the bruise-colored lipstick she loved so much and had gone for a subtle pinkish number. For a moment she considered pulling her brown hair into a prim little ponytail. Don't want to look too sexy for church, after all, but then she thought about Father Long. Man of God he may be, but Kelly had seen the cute little gleam in his eye when he looked her way.

Kelly laughed out loud. What would her momma say if she knew that after the parade of delinquents she dated in high school—hell, let's be honest: she was still dating them—Kelly had her sights set on a preacher man? One in his forties, too. She tried to tell herself that it wasn't sinful, then adjusted her blouse to reveal the tiniest hint of cleavage and got out of the car. As she stood, she realized the blouse didn't quite reach the top of her slacks, despite considerable tugging. She wasn't exactly used to shopping for Sunday-Go-To-Meetin' clothing and she had an undefeatable enthusiasm for low-slung pants. Maybe I'll shave my pubic hair into a little cross, she thought. Then she could ask Father Long to kneel and worship at its foot. Good bread, good meat, good God, let's eat. Kelly winced at the impolite, but admittedly not unpleasant, idea. Horrible. I'm completely horrible, she thought. Shaking her head, she started for the building, trying to remember not to put too much sway into her hips.

The Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel occupied a small storefront in

the strip mall, its interior hidden behind faded flower-print curtains. "Only ONE can mete out JUDGMENT," promised the hand-painted cardboard sign that sat in the window. Hundreds of dead flies littered the sill from end to end, piled a half-inch high in places.

Kelly paused at the door, staring at the dead flies. Suddenly, another one dropped from above, lending its corpse to the heap. The pesky insects always seemed to come here to the front of the building to die: the elephants' graveyard in miniature.

Bracing herself, she sucked in a deep breath, held it, and opened the door. A wave of hot air spilled out, thick with the stench of body odor and cheap perfume. The church couldn't afford air conditioning and there were a lot of folks crammed into the small space—a good thirty-five or forty God-fearing stink-producers of every age, size and shape. The old people seemed to put off the worst reek; a sour, stinging smell like rotted meat soaked in vinegar. Under the bouquet of drenched underarms and sweaty thighs, Kelly could pick up the faint aroma of cookies or cake, baked by one of the churchgoers. She'd never had the stomach to eat any of the stuff, however.

The congregation was settling into their seats when Kelly entered. The stink seemed worse tonight, somehow. Something new had been added to the usual mix of odors. She returned a number of smiles and waves as she took her own seat near the front, a metal folding chair that always put her right butt cheek to sleep.

The murmured pieces of conversation that Kelly could hear died away as Father Eric Long stepped out from behind a partition at the front of the room, Curtis Rickles at his side as always. Rickles made Kelly feel uncomfortable, though she wasn't quite sure why. He was always friendly to her, even if his eyes were constantly flicking to her breasts during their short conversations. She certainly couldn't hold that particular sin against a fellah, though. A former marine, Rickles had lost all of his upper front teeth and most of his left foot—not in combat, but in some sort of accident. He got around pretty good on what was left of his damaged hoof, but had a bad habit of popping his dentures out at unexpected moments. Kelly often wondered how the accident—whatever it may have been—had managed to tear him up at the top and the bottom but nowhere in between. Besides, he seemed a little skinny to be a marine, Kelly thought.

Now, on the other hand... She turned her attention to Father Long. The folksy preacher man was standing with hands in pockets, gazing out across the faces of his followers, a tiny, mysterious smile on his face. Not the best looking of men, but there was something about him Kelly couldn't put her finger on. Although she was certainly willing to put more than that on him, given the opportunity. Maybe he was rugged. And she wasn't sure she'd ever known anyone with charisma

before, but if the stuff existed, Long had plenty of it. The man stirred all sorts of bizarre notions in her, and at the moment what she really wanted was to settle down on Walton's Mountain with the guy, have a load of filthy sex, and start pupping out John-Boy and the gang. Then have some more sex.

Kelly wriggled in her seat. Her ass was already falling asleep, but the endless parade of Father Long ass-slapping fantasies dancing through her noggin were also creating a damp patch in her panties. It wasn't like she just wanted to fuck the guy. She respected him. She reflected on all the assholes she'd dated in the past. "Of course I'll call you. Are you kidding? You're the only one for me..."

She really did respect Father Long. He'd sure as hell be the only guy she'd ever get it on with who could be trusted. Why hadn't she thought of it before? There was just that little matter of getting the preacher to put out. Oh my God, Kelly suddenly thought. Will I have to marry him first? There had to be a way to get him to agree to a test drive.

She was disappointed when Long turned and strode to the church's makeshift altar without acknowledging her. Rickles took up his usual position nearby, arms folded across his chest, jarhead-as-altar-boy. As Long placed his hands on the podium and leaned forward to look upon the faces before him once more, his eyes finally fell on Kelly. There was that gleam again. A ripple of schoolgirl giddiness squirmed through her body.

"Hot in here, isn't it?" Long began.

You ain't just whistlin' Dixie, Kelly wanted to say as she surreptitiously squeezed her thighs together. A few members of the congregation chuckled as Long pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his brow. Kelly imagined him tossing the damp handkerchief to the crowd, Elvis-style. What would she have to do to score a backstage pass?

"We won't have to worry about this heat much longer." The preacher replaced the handkerchief and leaned forward on the podium again, smiling. "We have a new home."

The room erupted in applause, snapping Kelly out of her Long-induced reverie. Embarrassed, she awkwardly began clapping along.

Smiling humbly, Long gestured for silence. "I know you've all been looking forward to it, and I finally signed the papers to lease the land." There was another smattering of applause. "We leave before the week is out!" This time, Long's words brought whistles and cheers as well as hand clapping. It was what Kelly loved about the ministry—and Long. He brought all these people together, made them feel like they were part of something special. Made her feel special.

This time, Long let the applause play out, shooting a playful shrug at Rickles. When the hubbub finally died down, a solemn expression

came over Long. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"I know that having faith can sometimes be a burden. Your friends, sometimes even your family, can make you feel like... Well, like there's something wrong with you for believing so strongly." Long locked eyes with Kelly. She gasped audibly, then looked away, reddening. She was twenty-six years old. She shouldn't be such a giddy teenager.

"What happens to a prophet in this day and age?" Long continued, louder now. "We all know. We all watch the news. A prophet is shunned, ridiculed, maybe even killed for what he believes, what he gives voice to." Long stepped back from the podium, giving a slight nod to Rickles. Rickles in turn gestured to two other men, who left their seats and joined the ex-marine. The three disappeared behind the partition. Pulling his handkerchief out again, Long mopped the sweat from his face.

"I'm not talking about myself. I wouldn't be so bold. Look at your neighbor, the good person sitting next to you. That person is the prophet. We're all of us the prophet. And those who ridicule and deny?" Long took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I'm sad for them. Truly sad."

As if on cue, Rickles reappeared, shoving the partition aside. Behind it, the other two men stood on either side of a sheet spread across a bulky form laid out on the floor. Kelly craned her neck, trying to get a better look. A smile spread across Long's face. "Sad for them," he said, turning to face his flock again, "because they are so unprepared in the eyes of God."

With that, Rickles and the other men bent to take hold of whatever was beneath the sheet, Rickles at the top, the two men on either side. Struggling under its weight, they wrestled the thing into an upright position next to the altar, scraping the ceiling in the process. Kelly was reminded of the photo of the marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima. Long moved to stand next to the covered object. Kelly suddenly felt uneasy. Something about Long's smile had changed almost imperceptibly. With a grandiose gesture, Long yanked the sheet away. A collective gasp rose from the congregation. Kelly felt ready to spew as she stared in horror at the source of this new sickening stench.

Long spread his arms before the massive wooden cross and the figure bound to it. "I feel sad for them because the Hand of Judgment, the Heavenly Vessel, will soon be resurrected. And they will know that they have sinned!"

Upon the cross, lashed tightly to the thick beams with heavy rope, hung the lifeless body of Jason Voorhees. A single maggot wriggled from the right eyehole of his battered hockey mask. Kelly watched it squirm until it dropped to the floor, out of sight.

TWO

The bullet punched into Rector's face at the inner corner of his left eye, shattering his nose and skidding off the inside of his skull before erupting from the back of his head just behind the right ear. Most of Rector's college education went with it. The slug stung Captain Walter Hobb's neck as it whizzed past. Chunks of Rector's brain, seasoned with bits of skull and pieces of his Kevlar helmet, struck Hobb's face and bullet-proof vest with a sickening splat. Hobb staggered backwards, hand to his neck. He quickly withdrew it, looking for blood. The amount of gore made him feel woozy

The remaining members of Hobb's strike team had found cover and were awaiting orders before Rector's body had even hit the ground. A massive hand clamped down on Hobb's shoulder, steadying and pushing him to his knees in one motion. Hobb tried to look back, but his head was shoved roughly to the side as his hulking second-in-command examined the wound on his neck.

Jeff Townsend squinted one eye and looked a little closer at the ragged, inch-long slit on Hobb's neck. "You ain't even bleedin' enough to swell a tampon. Most of it's Rector." He released his grip on Hobb and peered through the trees towards the house where the shot came from. Hobb gaped at the human slab of beef kneeling beside him. Townsend topped out at six foot six and was so bulky he had to have his uniforms custom made. Hobb felt as if he were hunkered down beside a small car.

Someone in the house let out a loud whoop and a hailstorm of automatic weapons fire punched into the trees around the strike team. Hobb and Townsend split, rolling in opposite directions to find cover. "Element One, sustain fire!" Hobb shouted, coming up on one knee. "Element Two, flank!"

The six Operators that made up Element Two immediately peeled off to join Hobb and Townsend. The remaining eight men held their positions and opened up with their Heckler & Koch G36-K rifles. 5.56 caliber slugs hammered the house, sending chunks of tastefully painted trim and red brick shrapnel into the air.

"I'd say we had some faulty intel," Townsend wryly suggested.

Hobb couldn't agree more. It was supposed to be a walk in the park—a bunch of yuppie assholes who fancied themselves as bad-ass drug dealers, holed up in the woods cooking up a shitload of meth and trying to keep the stuff off their Italian loafers. They weren't supposed to put up a fight. They weren't supposed to have automatic weapons, and they sure as hell weren't supposed to blow the brains out of one of Hobb's men. His first command was officially fucked. Of course, it was no surprise, considering his luck had always leaned a little to the left of

lousy. It began when he sucked up a healthy load of his mom's genes—set him up with soap-opera-star good looks, but left him with a full height of five foot six and the physique of an Auschwitz survivor.

Needless to say, he spent many a school day with some bigger kid holding him down and scuffing his stunning cheekbones in the dirt, while punching him in the kidneys. Hobb's mom always said they were jealous. With her thick Czech accent, it came out more like, "Doan mine dem, dey choost chelluss." But Hobb never felt like he offered much for anybody to be jealous of. The muscle he carried now came from hard work and a wicked stubborn streak. The same went for his position on the strike team, and he was goddamned if a bunch of rich cocksuckers were going to rob him of it.

Hobb rattled off a series of hand signals to his men, his lips pressed tightly together in a cartoon-style frown. With all the gunfire and bullets flying around him, he realized he might as well have yelled the commands. Smoke drifted through the trees, stirred by the motion of Hobb's men as Element Two hustled their equipment-laden asses into a flanking position.

The house was about forty yards away, surrounded on all sides by forest. The trees cleared in a wide ring around the building itself, which meant no cover for that last sixty or so feet. Before Hobb's strike team had added the bullet holes to its decor, the house had been a pleasant two-story number, the kind of home you'd see in a photograph above the caption "Childhood home of President Take-Your-Pick." That particular photo probably wouldn't include the four high-end SUVs and the Jaguar XJS that were parked in a neat row out front, however.

Reaching a point about ninety degrees from Element One's position, Hobb brought Element Two to a halt with yet another hand signal and brought his binoculars to his eyes. Townsend knelt nearby and unsheathed a short-barreled shotgun. Hobb weighed their options. The men were directly across from the north side of the house. One window downstairs, two up, and what appeared to be a service door, probably leading to a laundry room or basement stairs. Busting through that door and finding themselves at the top of a stairwell with gunmen below would be—to put it mildly—problematic. The front door was currently taking fire from Element One, which left the back door or wall breach for entry. That service door seemed the best bet.

All they had to do was get to it.

The first shots had come from the ground floor, but Hobb could clearly see muzzle flashes from one of the upper-story windows at the front of the house as well. Amazing. He had expected them to cave in when the H & Ks erupted with machine gun fire. There was no sign of anyone at the north windows and none of the fire was directed in Element Two's direction, so Hobb assumed they'd managed to avoid

being seen as they flanked the house.

A squeal of pain split the cacophony of gunshots, and a yuppie toppled halfway out one of the second story windows at the front of the house, his body catching in the torn remains of the screen and dangling. Through the binoculars, Hobb noted that the slug had caught the fellow squarely in the face. What was left looked like hamburger with a hip hairstyle. The medical examiner would need the corpse's dental records for its identification... At Hobb's shoulder, Townsend grinned. One dead yuppie meant that there were from seven to thirteen men left in the house—if Hobb could rely on that part of the intel any better than the report stating that they weren't armed to the teeth with automatic weapons. Time to get the job done.

Hobb's hand whipped through the air again and Element Two moved out, leaving the relative safety of the trees by darting into the clearing. Moving in a V-formation, each man leap-frogged the one ahead of him, running up a few yards and kneeling in a firing position to cover the next man who moved up. Quickly and quietly, Element Two closed the distance between the trees and house. Hobb wished the yuppie fucks had parked their cars on this side of the house where they could be used for cover. He soothed himself with the knowledge that the overly expensive vehicles were being peppered with bullets.

There was movement at one of the windows upstairs. The barrel of Hobb's G36-K snapped up, zeroing in on the figure behind the curtains. The other team members kept moving. Hobb waited for the curtains to part, waited to see a gun leveled at him. In his head, he ticked off the remaining distance to the house and the speed of his men, not willing to look away from the target above him. The first of his men should be reaching the house by now, stacking along the wall...

Don't tell me this guy's not even gonna look out the window, Hobb thought. The fucker looked out of the window. Hobb's finger gently squeezed the trigger and released it. One round left the rifle's barrel and penetrated the glass with a deceptively tiny cracking sound. The spinning bullet took the curtain with it as it entered and exited from the yuppie's body. With a crescendo of arterial splatter and blood flowing freely from his chest, the yuppie staggered back, twitched and then dropped.

"Holy shit!" somebody in the house yelled.

By then, Hobb had already sprinted to the wall, coming up alongside Townsend outside the service door. A gun barrel smashed through what was left of the windowpane above. As shards of shattered glass fell on them, one of Hobb's men put a three-round burst into the general vicinity of the unseen gunman. Hobb pulled a flash-bang grenade from his vest pouch and nodded to Townsend. The big man shoved the muzzle of his shotgun against the doorknob and fired,

shredding the doorknob and bolt. Hobb kicked the door in, tossed the flash-bang inside and turned away as the explosive went off, instantly followed by a few startled yelps and screams from inside. Always good to hear.

The suppressing fire from Element One ceased once the building had been breached. The yuppies were still hollering in confusion as Hobb and Townsend entered the house. Through the haze, Hobb glimpsed the back of a man fleeing the room through another doorway. He then put three rounds into the chest of a second yuppie that was stunned, but frantically waving around a big handgun. Gore spouted from the yuppie's chest as he tumbled backwards over another victim who was down on his knees, clawing at his eyes in pain. The blinded yuppie shrieked like a three yearold being dragged out of Chuck E Cheese.

Hobb and Townsend ran the walls on either side of the door, coming to a stop at opposite corners. The room was about ten feet by ten—larger than Hobb had anticipated, although he noted he was right about the basement stairs, as a door was slightly ajar, a light flickering below. The doorway the yuppie had fled through appeared to lead to the kitchen. Not much in the room besides the screaming yuppie, the dead yuppie, and two large garbage cans, both filled with fast food trash, frozen dinner trays and beer bottles. And, Hobb bitterly noted, a brand he could rarely afford to drink.

Two more Operators entered the house—Meister and Couto—criss-crossing to the far corners of the room. As they covered the entry/exit points, Hobb made his way to the basement door and tossed another flash grenade down the stairs. Hobb was already moving to the remaining doorway as the grenade detonated. No screams this time. Hobb put another flash-bang through the kitchen doorway. A second later, a muted *fump* was immediately followed by a hell of a lot of shrieking from within. The remainder of the strike team was entering the house and moving into position as Hobb swept into the kitchen, Townsend close on his heels.

The unfortunate yuppie in the kitchen must have snatched up the flash-bang, hoping to throw it back. He held his clawed hands in front of him, bloody strips of scorched beef jerky flesh dangling from the bones. Ribbons of blood ran down his forearms. A wailing, high-pitched scream flowed from his gaping mouth, breaking off as he saw the two men enter the kitchen. The severely wounded yuppie suddenly flung himself at Hobb, shredded hands twisted into gore-dripping talons.

A load of double-ought buck from Townsend's shotgun put a scattered assortment of large holes in the yuppie's torso, sending him hurtling back across the kitchen. Meister appeared in the doorway behind Hobb and Townsend. A muzzle flash lit up through the smoke

as automatic weapon fire erupted from the next room. Hobb and Townsend dove for cover, bullets tearing up the fine cabinetry in the kitchen. Meister collapsed to the floor between the men, a stream of blood pulsing from the wound in his neck.

Townsend sent two rounds from his shotgun in the general direction of the incoming fire, satisfied by the screech of distress—and cessation of gunfire—that followed. Sliding through the deepening pool of Meister's blood, Hobb bent to check the man's condition. The bullet had found an artery; it had only taken seconds for most of the blood in Meister's body to relocate to the kitchen floor. "Son of a bitch," Hobb muttered. Somebody had set his team up to take a beating. Hobb pulled a flash-bang and tossed it into the room where the gunfire had come from. He turned away to await the explosion and, after a satisfying volley of screaming, turned back to enter the room. Then his bad luck *really* kicked in.

A flash-blinded yuppie bolted from the smoke, wildly swinging a baseball bat and screaming like a pissed-off teenage girl. The business end of the bat nailed Hobb dead in his right eye. Stumbling backwards, he slipped in the sticky pool of Meister's blood and dropped to the kitchen floor, his head thudding off the tile.

Hobb stared up at the blurred ceiling above him. He could hear faraway popping sounds, like he was dreaming of the Fourth of July. Someone in black knelt next to him, lifting his head and peering closely in his eyes while speaking a language he couldn't quite place. People were shouting somewhere or *everywhere*, from the sound of it. Hobb's hands went to his eyes, trying to clear his vision. When he touched the balloon full of blood and roofing nails that used to be his right eye, the ceiling flashed white-hot and he was sucked backwards into darkness.

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It was weird. Nearly all the members of Father Long's congregation were milling around the church's parking lot, but there wasn't a single car parked there. Kelly watched the others chatter excitedly, grinning with anticipation and religious fervor. Their suitcases were lined up neatly along the front wall of the building, one small bag per person, just as Long had told them. Kelly glanced down at the little gym bag she held. It contained a few changes of simple clothes—"suitable for work and play," Long had suggested—but she'd made a point of including her favorite just-a-hair-too-tight wife-beater T-shirt and shorts that revealed the tiniest hint of butt cheek. Inappropriate, she supposed, but as a means to an end, that was just what the doctor ordered. Well, she hoped so, anyway.

Kelly chewed her lower lip nervously. She should probably put her bag with the rest of them and join the other members of the group.

Instead, she considered fleeing, just turning tail and running like hell, not looking back and never giving Long another thought. Yeah, that's happen. Kelly not thinking about Long would be like a teenage boy not thinking about Britney Spears.

The man had the corpse of Jason Voorhees strapped to a cross!

Where would you come into possession of such a thing? It's not like they auction off the bodies of dead mass murderers down at the state fair. It was a prop, a dummy, maybe even one of the congregation decked out in a Halloween costume—a really high-quality Halloween costume... Just add maggots. And what about that awful smell?

It wasn't Jason Voorhees. And this wasn't the same damn argument Kelly had been having with herself for the last two days. The one that had been raging within her even as the toothless guy at the shitty used-car dealership had stuffed three hundred dollars into her hand. A good price for her Honda, he'd said, especially considering the shape it was in. Or when she'd sold her furniture to the second-hand shop, even her favorite, super-comfy, old recliner, the one she liked to curl up in when it was cold and drink hot chocolate and think about finding a decent guy.

And by the time she was donating most of her clothes to the Salvation Army, she very nearly believed what she was telling herself. It wasn't Jason Voorhees. Long was making a point somehow, using a representation of something horrible to teach his followers a lesson about the Word of God. Christ, she didn't even believe in God. But somehow she made herself believe in Long. So that she had performed her duty as a member of the ministry, just as the others obviously had. She'd sold off her worldly possessions and had come here to take the next step.

Sighing, Kelly started across the parking lot. She hoped Long wouldn't mind that she was wearing the little powder-blue, flower-print sundress. She had fully intended to sell it, before remembering that the reverend had once complimented her on the way it flattered her figure. A comment like that had to mean the man of God had a little of the devil in him.

"Kelleee!" The delighted squeal erupted from an exuberant seventeen year-old girl bouncing across the parking lot in Kelly's direction.

"Hey, Meredith." Kelly smiled wide, trying to get into the spirit of things. Meredith Host had imprinted on Kelly during her first visit to the church, latching onto her as a sort of big sister figure. What a brilliant idea that was, Kelly thought—if it weren't for the ministry, she probably would've had the teenager out drinking and getting laid. Not that Kelly had been very successful in recent months when it came to the latter.

Giggling furiously, Meredith leapt skyward one last time, flinging her arms around Kelly and squeezing the living hell out of her. Her braided red pigtails slapped Kelly's cheeks as the girl wriggled against her. Over Meredith's head, Kelly smiled at the teenager's parents. Her dad had to be in his early sixties, her mom close on his heels. Kelly wondered if Meredith was a little accident, conceived in a night of unbridled Godlessness, regretted the following morning. Come to think of it, Meredith really didn't look much like her dad. Maybe the mom did some partying back in the day? Was there a little of the milkman in young Meredith? I am such an asshole, Kelly thought, admonishing herself. The Hosts were nice people and they were always good to her. They deserved a little respect in return.

Releasing her death grip on Kelly, Meredith bopped around from foot to foot, looking for all the world like she might wet her pants. "Isn't it cool?" she squeaked. "I can't believe we're finally going!"

"I know, it's crazy," Kelly said. When she was seventeen she wouldn't have had the least bit of interest in ridding herself of her possessions and running off to some commune, unless said commune involved lots of dope and deep-dicking. And even then she wouldn't have given up her Cure albums. "Didn't it sting a little when you had to sell your stuff, though?"

Meredith stopped bouncing and fixed Kelly with a funny look, like a dog trying to figure out what's on television. "We didn't have to sell anything. We chose to. Because we love Father Long." A smile spread across her face. "And God."

The girl's excited bopping began again. Kelly stared at her for a moment, forcing a smile of her own. It's a good thing she's got the Lord, Kelly pondered, trying not to watch Meredith's pert breasts as she danced around. The girl grabbed Kelly's wrist, tugging at her. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

Kelly stumbled along as Meredith led her across the parking lot. "You're gonna break my neck," she laughed. Meredith was dragging her towards her parents and the rest of the congregation, but Kelly used her slightly larger body like a rudder to change the girl's course. "Wait, I've gotta put my suitcase with the others."

Laughing, Meredith veered off towards the row of luggage, still hauling Kelly along. Though she wasn't quite sure what inspired it in the first place, Kelly enjoyed the attention the girl heaped upon her. After all, the kind of attention she was accustomed to usually involved screaming, physical abuse and the occasional cup of coffee being flung at her. Maybe being a big sister wouldn't be so bad after all.

Kelly dropped her gym bag with the rest of the luggage and lifted the strap of her sundress, which had dropped dangerously low during the run. "Look, I've almost made my boob fall out."

Meredith laughed, impishly poking Kelly's left breast with her index finger.

"Hey," Kelly yelped, looking around shyly. "Meredith! What would your parents think if they saw you do that?"

The girl shrugged theatrically with a goofy grin on her face.

"Besides, yours aren't so small, either," Kelly pointed out. She went to jab Meredith's breast and the girl dodged away, crossing her arms in front of herself.

"Come on." Kelly threw an arm around Meredith's shoulders and the two walked over to join the others.

Meredith's parents greeted Kelly enthusiastically, with friendly hugs and smooches on her cheek. She instantly felt like a complete jerk for questioning the circumstances of Meredith's birth.

Mr Host looked around at the blue sky overhead, his pudgy, wrinkled face radiating happiness. His wispy white hair blew around in the soft breeze. "Today is a good day," he began, his smile settling on Kelly. "We're starting over again, all of us. How many people are given that opportunity?"

"Bless Father Long," Mrs Host interjected. From the practiced way she said it, Kelly got the impression that the sentence was her only contribution to many recent discussions.

"A good man indeed," Mr Host added.

It couldn't have been Jason Voorhees; it simply *couldn't* have. Otherwise somebody else would've been freaked out like Kelly was. But looking around, all she saw were big smiles and happy people, who had just sold everything they owned on the orders of the man they believed would lead their souls to the Promised Land. She fought down the urge to ask Meredith's parents what they thought about the—the *thing*, or whatever it was that had been bound to that cross. After the way Meredith had reacted to her comment about selling everything, it didn't seem like such a good idea to bring it up. Again, the desire to get the hell out of there tugged at her.

"I want to sit next to you on the bus, okay?" Meredith asked.

Kelly realized she'd been holding her breath, "Like I'd let you sit anywhere else," she said, giving the girl a playful shove.

"Boobs of a feather," Meredith said, shooting a sly glance at her parents. Kelly's eyes widened.

"Say what?" her father asked, cupping a hand to his ear.

"I said Kelly and me are birds of a feather, Daddy," Meredith giggled.

Smiling, Mr Host looked from his daughter to Kelly. She struggled to contain her laughter. "I believe you are, at that," the old man proudly stated.

A hell of a lot of racket saved Kelly any further embarrassment. Everyone turned as a rattletrap old school bus pulled into the parking

lot, engine growling and just about everything else squeaking or clanking. The name of whatever school district the bus once served had been scraped off, replaced by the words "Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel" stenciled in garish red over the yellow paint. A cheer went up from the congregation. Kelly didn't share their enthusiasm, however; the arrival of the bus only drove home the feeling that she had stepped off a cliff a few hours back and was merely waiting for the impact when she hit the bottom.

Following close behind, the bus was the old primer-gray pickup truck belonging to Curtis Rickles. The truck towed some kind of generator or air compressor or something—Kelly wasn't sure what, but it was a good-sized piece of equipment. Probably meant there was a lot of work to be done at the congregation's new digs.

The school bus came to a halt, its various unpleasant sounds ceasing a moment or two afterwards, as if running to catch up with the vehicle. Kelly hung back as everyone crowded excitedly around the bus. The door folded open and Eric Long stepped into view, beaming at his followers with a smile that would have made Charlton Heston feel inadequate. Another boisterous cheer rose from the crowd and they pushed in closer, those near enough reaching out to lay hands on Long, some patting him affectionately, others just wanting to touch the man.

Kelly couldn't help it—she wanted to touch him too. Breaking into a smile, she ran the short distance to the bus and waded into the group. Shouldering her way through, she forced herself to the front and looked up at Long, her smile melting into a shy little grin. Something fluttered in her stomach as he met her gaze.

His eyes still locked on Kelly as he addressed the congregation. "What are you all standing around for? Waiting on a bus?"

Kelly joined in the delighted laughter.

"Are you going somewhere?" Long asked, drawing it out and obviously enjoying every second of it. His eyes finally flicked away from Kelly's.

The crowd's voices went up as one. "With you!" More laughter and cheering followed.

The preacher stepped down from the bus, gesturing towards the vehicle. "It's not pretty, but it'll get us there."

"It's beautiful," Mrs Host said.

Long craned his neck to see the row of luggage, which was all that remained of his follower's belongings. His smile faded, replaced by an expression of humble gratitude. "You've all sacrificed so much for this. For our future."

Prompted by this, Mr Host pulled an overstuffed envelope from his shirt pocket and offered it to Long. Kelly saw that it was full of cash. Her own envelope was pathetically thin in comparison. The family

really had sold everything—all the belongings they'd collected throughout their considerable years. How much emotional value was attached to some of those personal belongings? How fat would *that* envelope be?

Father Long held up a hand. "When we reach our destination." He smiled at Mr Host as the old man nodded and returned the envelope to his pocket. "It'll all go in the pot then. There's a lot of hard work, a lot of sweat ahead of us before that house can be called a home." He turned slowly, his gaze seemingly falling on each and every one of his followers. "But with your contributions—your sacrifices—we will create a community of the Lord where all of us can live in accordance with His teachings. Where we can be free. Where we can prosper. Where we can raise our children in a morally substantial environment." His eyes flicked to Kelly's for the slightest instant, then darted away again.

Wait! Was that glance meant to be meaningful? And if it was, how? Was Long hinting at the possibility of engaging in a little procreation with her, or was he giving her a gentle slap on the wrist for her morally bankrupt past?

A handful of praise and "amens" went up from the congregation. But even as Long's words stirred something within her, made her feel a sense of unity with the good flesh of those around her, Kelly's ever-present guilt gnawed within the base of her skull. For God's sake, she wanted to sleep with this man. No, that was too polite a way to put it. What would the Hosts think of her? Hell, what would Meredith think of her if they knew the lustful thoughts she was having towards their spiritual leader? Tearing her eyes from Long, Kelly looked around herself, abashed. These people were true believers, honest-to-God keepers of the faith. She was a traitor in their midst, someone who wanted to drag this good man down with her sordid depravity. She didn't deserve to be among them—she should be on a psychiatrist's couch. Thanks, Mom, Kelly seethed. Thanks for every-goddamn-thing.

"...our children, because we're all children of God," Kelly heard Long say as she snapped back to the moment at hand.

Except some of us need to stand in the corner, she wanted to say. Long's impromptu sermon was interrupted as another vehicle arrived, this time a faded red, 1960s-era International Scout, hauling a fifteen foot enclosed trailer. Kelly might have had doubts earlier, still had them to an extent, but at least it was obvious Long wasn't pissing away everyone's money on expensive cars. She watched as the Scout pulled to a stop and Don James climbed out. James was another of Long's inner circle, a buff biker in his late twenties, solidly muscular without being ripped, his beefy arms drenched in tattoos. Some of them looked to Kelly to be of the jailhouse variety, meaning he was no doubt a convict convert when it came to his faith. If a guy like that could find it

in him to love the Lord, maybe there was hope yet for Kelly. She watched as James smoothed his impressive mustache. The thick fur obscured his mouth, the ends dangling down several inches past his jaw line, but she thought he was probably smiling underneath. A hand fell on Kelly's shoulder, causing her to jump.

"Hey there, it's okay," Long said. Cupping her shoulder in his palm, he drew her in for a friendly squeeze.

Every drop of moisture was instantly sucked out of Kelly's mouth. She felt like the high school quarterback had picked her to sit with in the lunchroom, and was sure she could feel the envious eyes of everyone in the congregation settling on her.

"You kept the sundress." Long smiled at her.

Oh—my—God... Kelly desperately struggled to swallow. She hoped the preacher wouldn't notice her hardening nipples. Why hadn't she realized how tall he was? Or seen the tiny streaks of silver beginning to appear at his temples? Thank God he didn't have TV evangelist hair, a lacquered-up pompadour that looked like something Devo would have worn on tour. No, Long definitely had good hair: short, slightly tousled and not a hint of product. And boy, did he smell good. She'd never noticed it before, thanks to the funk that usually overwhelmed the strip-mall church. Put the man on a mule, she thought, and you could remake *A Fistful of Dollars*.

"Yeah," she chirped insipidly. "Um, I hope that's okay."

Long nodded. "It's pretty."

Kelly's stomach did a little flip.

Across the parking lot, Curtis Rickles had limped over to join Don James, and the men were talking. "Curtis," Long called. "I'd like you to get the folks started loading their bags onto the bus."

Trying hard not to think too much about the warmth radiating from Long's hand on her shoulder, Kelly heard Meredith let out a squeal of glee. An instant later, the girl was capering around in front of her and the preacher. "I feel like I'm going to summer camp or something," Meredith giggled. "Father Long, you are so cool!"

Long gave an aw-shucks grin. "I don't know about cool," he said. Kelly looked up at the preacher just in time to see him shoot a wink at Curtis Rickles. "Meredith, do me a favor, honey. Ride along with Curtis in his truck, will you?"

Meredith's joyful dancing came to a stop. "But I was gonna sit with Kelly on the bus."

"I wouldn't ask, but it's a long drive ahead of us, and Curtis, he'll be all alone in that truck. Hasn't even got a radio in there." Meredith pouted. "Sure be nice of you to keep him company, honey." Long's voice could have poured like thick syrup. "That's a lonely drive for a man on his own."

Kelly almost offered to ride with Curtis herself, as much as the man gave her the heebie-jeebies, but she couldn't get the words to come out. She watched in guilty silence as Meredith scraped the toe of her shoe on the asphalt, considering but not wanting to play along.

"Okay, I guess," the girl finally agreed.

"Good girl," Long said. "You're doing me a huge favor. I owe you one, okay?"

Meredith just nodded and gave Kelly a disappointed look. "We'll hang out a lot when we get there, don't worry," Kelly offered. It didn't ease her discomfort about the girl being stuck with Rickles for hours on end. She knew how much the man liked to stare at breasts and Meredith was certainly sporting an impressive pair. If nothing else, Kelly worried about Rickles's ability to keep his eyes on the road under such circumstances.

"Yeah, you two will have lots of time together," Long added. "For now, why don't you see if you can help Curtis load everyone's bags?"

Meredith frowned, but scurried off to do as Long asked. Maybe it was her imagination, but Kelly thought Rickles greeted the girl's arrival with a particularly predatory smile, albeit of the toothless variety. She tried to fight down her trepidation and concentrate on Long instead. "So if the bags are going on the bus, what's in the trailer?"

A satisfied smile spread across Long's face. "Nothing, yet."

Kelly wasn't sure why, but Long's touch suddenly felt ice-cold.

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Curtis Rickles smiled as he watched Meredith walk slowly towards him. He had to admit, she didn't look too pleased about whatever Long had asked her to do—in fact, she looked like she was heading for the electric chair—but Good Lord the girl was cute, even when she was being a little resentful. Truth be known, sulking was one hundred percent a-okay with Rickles.

"Hey, little lady," Rickles cheerfully greeted Meredith as she drew near. "What brings you over my way?"

"Father Long says I have to ride with you," she said morosely.

Rickles felt his face flush. Thank you, Father Long. You are a good and honest man.

The girl stopped several feet away from Rickles, but he made up for it by stepping closer to her. "Aw," he said. "Instead of with your friend over there?"

Not looking at Rickles, Meredith nodded, a frown twisting her lips into an even more pronounced pout.

"Well, I know I'm not much of a substitute, but I hope you know I sure appreciate the company," Rickles told the girl, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. Meredith pulled away delicately. Rickles couldn't be quite sure if she were recoiling from his touch or just

wobbling a little. He withdrew his hand—didn't want to put a fright in the young thing. "I'll try to be entertaining, I promise," he said, smiling.

She looked up at him, then quickly turned away. Rickles followed her gaze, back to where Meredith's buddy stood with Father Long. "Kelly Mills, right?"

The woman was a stone tramp. Father Long was right to have Meredith ride with him. God only knew what kind of filthy ideas that slut would plant in the girl's head. She would've been ready to give blowjobs in back alleys by the time they got off the bus. Rickles had pegged Kelly for what she was the first time she'd shown up at the ministry—just another coked-out piece of trash-gash, the kind of woman you could get for the price of a Manhattan or a whiskey sour. Hell, maybe even a draft beer. He'd seen hundreds of them in his day, and whether or not Kelly had decided to accept the Lord into her life didn't change a thing. The stink of easy tail still hung heavy on the broad, and he didn't want her to spread that corruption to Meredith Host.

Curtis Rickles had a vision, and he planned to steer the girl a little differently. Not that he'd turn down a blowjob if she were to offer—*oh nosirree*—but he foresaw a brighter future for Meredith, one that involved a very close relationship with him, wherein he would offer up his guidance and hard-won wisdom. A future where they might build a life together.

And he'd receive plenty of blowjobs. But that was just the gravy on the biscuits. Curtis Rickles was here to make something of his life, because he had done a pretty fine job in the past of taking the opportunities the Lord sent his way and flushing them like a toilet full of turds, and he didn't figure the man upstairs had the patience with him to throw him too many chances.

Of course, he'd never had much faith in the Lord before he met Father Long. That was why he'd always been such a colossal fuck-up. As a kid, Rickles had never wanted to listen to anybody—figured he knew better than most anybody else, after all—and he sure as hell didn't want to work for a living. That's what led him to rob that gas station when he was eighteen years old. Just two days after his birthday, two days into the life where he'd be tried as an adult for the stupid shit he pulled. He was lucky then and they offered to drop the charges if he opted for military service, so he'd enlisted in the Marine Corps. They didn't want him, but with some pressure from the parole board, he was accepted. Last thing he wanted was to join the damn army. If he was going to soldier, he was going to do it right and be a jarhead.

It quickly became apparent that Curtis Rickles wasn't any better at being a marine than he was at being a simple law-abiding citizen. He

was constantly in trouble with his drill instructor during basic training, and narrowly slithered past a dishonorable discharge for insubordination. After he got out of boot camp, life in the corps itself wasn't exactly Rickles's cup of tea, either. The first thing he knew, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and it was during Rickles's tour over in that festering shit-hole of sand that he lost his teeth and a chunk of his left foot.

The accident had calmed him a little, and he was able to tough out the rest of his enlistment with few unpleasant incidents, aside from some drunken dust-ups here and there. With only part of a foot, he spent most of his time jockeying a supply desk and it was tough to get into trouble, unless you were dumb enough to steal from the US Government. When the corps finally kicked him back into civilian life, he had walked the straight and narrow for exactly two weeks before he was in trouble again. Somehow, he allowed himself to be suckered into a blood-and-teeth-spitting barroom brawl, and the stupidest part was that it had been over a cheap slut just like Kelly Mills. Sneering down at him, the woman had stepped over his twisted body as he lay battered and bleeding on the floor, Buck Owens warbling from the jukebox, and walked out with the guy who kicked the shit out of him. A guy who had, moments before, been roughing the woman up.

Things only got worse after that. He bounced in and out of a series of minimum wage jobs, finally losing his car in a pile-up while working as a pizza delivery boy. Spiraling into a deep depression, Rickles decided there was only one way to make things better and it wasn't exactly the approach to problem solving that God tended to smile upon. Rickles planned to blow his goddamn brains out.

Scrounging up what money he could, he bought a cheap handgun from a half-assed homeboy who was exceedingly happy to be rid of the thing. Rickles figured he must have used it in a drive-by or a robbery and didn't have the sense to throw it into a river. He was walking home from the punk's apartment, the gun shoved into the back of his pants, when he met Father Eric Long.

Long had hit a pothole and blown out the front tire of his car, and while he might be a real champ when it came to bringing people together and helping them follow the true path, he couldn't change a flat. The man was basically helpless, standing next to the car with the jack at his feet, lug wrench in his hand and the spare leaning against the fender while he stared at the wrecked tire with an expression of utter confusion. At the time, Rickles was merely annoyed by the man's uselessness, but looking back on it, he felt like it was almost innocently sweet.

Figuring he should do one decent thing before ending his miserable life, Rickles stopped to change the flat for Father Long. It was the

smartest thing he'd ever done, and nobody would ever be able to convince him that God himself hadn't planted the two men in that exact spot at that exact time so that Rickles's immortal soul could be saved. It started out as simple chit-chat while Rickles worked, but in short order he had found himself weeping as he spilled his guts to the preacher, confessing all his sins right there in the damn street, a pistol sticking out of the back of his pants and his hands smeared with axle grease. Father Long took him out for a good meal at the Waffle House and, once the forks hit the empty plates, the two men shook hands on the deal that made Rickles an employee of the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel.

Rickles had to admit that he was a little confused by some of Father Long's more esoteric beliefs, but he would never voice that openly—and anything the father said was fine by him, no matter how oddball it may have sounded. And in fact, Rickles's proudest achievement as Long's good right hand was the discovery that he had made, providing the final key for the preacher's grand plan. It had certainly made Father Long happy, and the man was making good on that now by sending Meredith Host to Rickles so they could become better acquainted on the long drive ahead.

Reminding himself to keep his lips pressed together—didn't want to flash those empty gums at the girl again, he gave Meredith another smile. He was really looking forward to the time alone with her. "We're gonna have a good time, I just betcha," he assured her.

"Okay," she muttered softly, still not looking directly at him.

She appeared to be a little dubious, but things would be just fine. Father Long said so, and that was almost like getting a sign from the Good Lord himself. Rickles realized his palms were sweaty, like a kid on his first date. This was going to be a swell trip, all right.

THREE

Hobb bounced off the doorframe, giving his shoulder a painful whack as he exited the hospital. His right eye was bandaged and he hadn't been conscious long enough to adjust to the lack of peripheral vision. He paused in the open doorway, exhaling sharply through gritted teeth. He wanted to kick the sliding doors off their tracks, but he managed to get a hold of his rage and frustration and throttle them both into submission. Besides, if he did unleash a furious foot at the doors, he'd probably only hurt himself worse. His muscles unclenching, he brought a hand to his bandaged eye and gently prodded around; the whole side of his face was throbbing painfully, a constant hammer blow timed to each beat of his heart. He felt more than a little dizzy, too. He had to be nursing a pretty serious concussion, after taking so hard a hit.

Fuck it. Hobb stepped outside. The slight breeze caught the back of his hospital gown, sending a cool draft across his ass and balls. He felt his scrotum shrivel and he grabbed at the flapping gown, looking back to see if anyone had suffered the view. There was only one person in the corridor behind him, an old man piloting a walker with some difficulty. The look on his face told Hobb the last thing he was concerned with, at his advanced age, was seeing somebody's bare butt.

Turning back to the parking lot, Hobb looked around for Townsend, but the big man was nowhere to be seen. Hoping to avoid any more embarrassing gusts of wind, Hobb tugged his uniform pants from the bundle of clothing he carried. He shook them out, preparing to step into them. Then he realized they were still damp with blood. Mostly Meister's, he figured, but probably some of his own as well. Opting to risk nudity, Hobb stuffed the pants back into the bundle and then wiped his hands on his gown, leaving smears of gore. Cradling the bundle of clothes in his right arm like a soccer ball, he reached back with his left hand to pinch the flaps of his gown together as he waited for his second in command.

When he had awakened in the hospital, Hobb was relieved to find that he was alone; at least until the thought occurred to him that he might have a room to himself because the rest of his team had been annihilated. That's when Hobb had called Townsend's cell phone, holding his breath until his buddy answered. Townsend was obviously glad to hear from Hobb, but the big man's tone made it crystal clear that some shit was going down and Hobb's call had interrupted it. He strained to listen in as Townsend, and at least two other men, carried on a heated conversation, their muffled voices rising towards the end and then suddenly breaking off. Then Townsend was back on the line, quietly referring to the other men as "cocksuckers" before asking Hobb

how he was doing. Ignoring that particular sentiment, Hobb asked the question he dreaded hearing the answer to.

Meister and Rector dead. Clark, Anderson and Grissom wounded, but treated and released. Amazingly, there were no other casualties on the strike team. The yuppies weren't so lucky, however. All but two of them had been killed, apparently willing to defend their glamorous drug-dealing lifestyle to the bitter end. Pimp for life, or some shit like that. Townsend began to fill Hobb in on what had happened since the bat-wielding yuppie had hit an out-of-the-park homer with his face, but he cut the big man off and told him to come pick him up. No way in hell was he going to stay in the hospital. There were some cocksuckers out there who had a lot to answer for.

Townsend's Chevy Cavalier roared into the hospital parking lot, coming to a stop at the curb where Hobb was waiting. The compact car barely contained the enormous hulk of a man, making it appear as if his muscular frame would explode from within the metal interior any second. Hobb opened the passenger door and crouched to climb in. A wave of dizziness swept over him. Catching himself against the car, he teetered there for a moment.

"Need a hand?" Townsend asked.

"I'm good." He closed his eyes—well, *eye*, since he wasn't sure he still had two—and inhaled deeply a few times. His left eye opened wide and he looked back at the hospital just as the old man was clunking his way out the door. Hobb wondered if it was another escape attempt, or if the old man was just out for a particularly laborious stroll.

"This is gonna be bare ass on the seat cover, Hobb said as he settled into the vehicle.

Townsend shrugged. "It's a rental."

Hobb tossed his bundled uniform into the back seat and Townsend hit the gas. The tires chewed on tarmac as they spun forwards, burning rubber smoldering in their wake as Hobb sank deep into his seat. The old man glared balefully at the racket.

"It's not a prison break, for Christ's sake," Hobb griped.

Townsend, his bulk pressing against the steering wheel, guided the car out of the parking lot and into the street, where it settled in amongst other vehicles in the traffic flow. With his hand held to his bandaged eye, Hobb peered gloomily out the window. Typical eastern rural community: lots of trees and grass between the scattered buildings, mom-and-pop drugstore, kids on bikes. "I don't even know what town this is," Hobb muttered to himself.

"What do you remember?" Townsend asked.

"Rector getting shot. Meister getting shot. Assholes with automatic weapons they weren't supposed to have." Hobb squinted with his good eye, trying to get his bearings. "And some yuppie fuck taking a baseball

bat to my prettiest eye. Are we in Silverton?"

Townsend shook his head. "Just across the border. Lamont, Ohio. Nearest town with a hospital."

Hobb pulled down the sun visor and looked at himself in the mirror. The bandage covered his right eye, much of his forehead and his entire right cheekbone. A stunning purple-black bruise spread from beneath the bandage, threatening to consume most of his face. Hobb picked at the adhesive tape, loosening the upper part of the bandage and carefully peeling it down.

"Ooh, fuck," Townsend said, trying to watch the road and Hobb at the same time. "So much for your good looks."

The last of the bandage gave way and Hobb hesitantly checked out his reflection. "I saw this in a horror movie once," he joked, his cracking voice giving away to the sudden hysteria he felt. The right side of his face was swollen to the point where it almost looked like another head was beginning to sprout from within his skull. The eye was pinched shut and bloated, a ribbon of clear, gooey fluid oozing from the inner corner. The baseball bat had split his forehead from underneath the eyebrow to just below his hairline. The ragged laceration was neatly stitched shut, but blood still seeped from the wound.

"Fucking Frankenstein," Hobb whispered. He fought down the urge to vomit and thought about weeping instead.

"They're stripping you of your command," Townsend said gravely. "Making you the fall guy."

At that, he could fight no more. Frantically rolling down his window, Hobb thrust his head out as a flood of puke spewed from his stomach, streaking the side of the car like garish pin-striping. When the last drop of bile had passed his parched lips, Hobb choked a few times, spat out morsels of undigested food, sat back in his seat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. and then wiped that on his hospital gown.

Hobb fixed the big man with his single blue eye. "What a wonderful sense of timing you have."

"They knew about the automatic weapons, Walt."

Stunned, Hobb continued to stare at the giant stuffed ridiculously into the driver's seat.

"They didn't... Shit," Townsend raged, lips tight with anger. "They didn't think the yuppie fucks had as many as they did, but they knew."

"Do they think somebody set us up?"

"It's not like that. The intel came in late. Not so late they couldn't have let us know, though."

Hobb's eye flicked up to the mirror again. He watched a bead of sweat roll out of his hairline and follow the jagged path of the cut in his forehead, finally getting lost in what was left of his eyebrow. "I'm missing something here," he said. "What aren't you tellin' me?"

Townsend stared at Hobb way too long, then caught himself driving onto the shoulder lane. Jerking the wheel, he brought the car back into its lane, jostling Hobb once again. Townsend kept his eyes on the road as he spoke. "They deliberately withheld the information."

"To what end?" Hobb asked, his throat tight.

"Exact words? We didn't want another Waco."

Hobb sat in silence for several moments, until he realized his mouth was hanging open stupidly. "Another Waco?" he snarled. "Well, they sure as hell avoided that, didn't they? They got a fucking bloodbath, but at least it wasn't like Waco. We got it over with quick."

"I could have strangled the bastards, Walt. I probably would have if you hadn't called and insisted I come get you." Townsend's massive hands strangled the steering wheel instead, clenching it in a white-knuckled grip. "They told me they withheld the intel because they were worried we'd go in with guns blazing if we thought we were up against a bunch of drug dealers with machine guns."

"That was a beautiful plan. Worked like a charm."

"They say you didn't respond to the situation in accordance with your training," Townsend said. "That's the official version of the incident."

"And that's what Rector and Meister's wives will hear," Hobb fumed.

"No," Townsend replied immediately. "I'll make sure they know the whole story."

"Fuck, it's probably true. Maybe the whole thing was my fault. Thing I can't figure is how the hell the yuppie bastards got the drop on us in the first place."

"That's where they think we were set up."

Hobb looked at Townsend. "And I'm taking the fall? That doesn't add up."

"This thing's all over the news. The agency looks bad. They need a sacrificial lamb," Townsend said. "They're going to offer you the chance to resign. Said they want you to be able to go out with some dignity."

"How fucking civilized of them," Hobb said. He turned back to the window, watching the scenery roll by. The storefronts and houses were dropping behind them, giving way to ranchland and open fields. He watched as a smartly dressed young girl put a galloping horse through its paces, pursued by an excited collie. "Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you home," Townsend said.

Hobb leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eye. Home. That was going to be a hell of a long drive.

***

Hobb had never seen his wife cry before. It was something he never wanted to see again. Lauren already knew that the strike team's

operation had gone wrong—Hobb had used Townsend's cell phone to let her know they were coming, and like Townsend had said, the story was all over the news—but she wasn't prepared for Hobb's freakish appearance. He even managed to make himself look a little weirder on the nine hour drive home; Townsend had asked him to wear his bandage, but Hobb refused, instead mopping up the various fluids oozing from his face with paper napkins he'd collected when they stopped for some cheeseburgers. Pieces of paper came off the napkins, clinging to the stitches in Hobb's forehead. Townsend had remarked that this added embellishment not only made Hobb look more horrifying, but insane as well. Hobb didn't really care; he just knew there was no way he was putting that goddamned diaper of a bandage back on his face.

Seeing Lauren with tears streaming down her face made him wish he had, though. His fucked-up kisser might have had a little less impact if she had been introduced to the bandage first. She stood in front of him, weeping softly, while gently bunching up the front of his hospital gown in her fists. Glancing off at Townsend, who sat on the couch trying to make his overwhelming mass seem as small as possible, Hobb wrapped Lauren's hands in his own, putting a stop to her nervous grasping. She had gathered so much of the fabric in her hands that his balls were about to make an unannounced appearance, and he felt like Townsend had suffered enough for one day.

Lauren sniffled sharply and then embraced him. She had a good three inches on Hobb, but she somehow always managed to make him feel like the tall one when they hugged. He ran his hands through her shoulder-length black hair and then crushed her lovingly in an embrace, luxuriating in the warmth radiating from her body. She was the only good luck he'd ever had, although it took him a while to catch on to the fact.

They'd met in college, where Hobb had kicked around in boredom for a few weeks before he suddenly found he had a wild hair up his ass, and that hair wanted him to do something about his wormy little body. The hair, as many do, spoke from the perspective of one who is surrounded by beautiful—and, this being college, one suspected horny—young women. Sure, Hobb had dark, wavy hair, hunky Eastern-European bone structure and intriguingly out-of-place blue eyes. But once his clothes were off he was little more than a stick figure with a hard-on. At least the hard-on wasn't as skinny as the rest of him, but that only added to his goofy appearance—it was like a beer can had been glued to a twig at an odd angle. Something had to be done.

So Hobb hit the school's gym, and that's where he found Lauren. When your first impression of a girl is, "I'll bet she makes that same sound when she's fucking," you know you're in trouble, and Hobb

figured Lauren was a bundle of that. He watched open-mouthed as she strained to lift a barbell laden with more weight than Hobb could have moved with a truck, her scorching red hair (she gave up dyeing it that particular color after graduation) plastered to her pale skin with globules of sweat. She was built like a brick shithouse full of bobcats—partly from hard work but mostly thanks to Mama—and was obviously filled with nothing but disdain for the scrawny young lad gawking at her from across the room. In fact, she did little more than sneer at him that first time, but it was a sneer dripping with promise as much as with contempt, Hobb convinced himself. As if this lusciously ripe model of female pulchritude were issuing a challenge.

Hobb began working out whenever he could, usually when Lauren was in the gym. It would take some effort to get him to admit it, but he actually rearranged his class schedule around her workouts, and that's when he wound up studying criminology. Within a month, he started peeling his shirt off before his workouts, boldly displaying the gains he'd made—minor though they may have been at the time—to his chosen mate. Then, one fine afternoon as he was performing his third set of concentration curls, he noticed Lauren standing nearby, eyeballing him with a cockeyed little grin on her face. Meeting her stare and holding it, he finished his reps, dropped the dumbbell, and wiped sweat from his brow.

"Looking good," she said. Then she turned and walked away.

Hobb stared after her undulating, delectable buttocks for a moment. Then he realized he was extremely pissed-off. Who the hell does she think she is? Hobb seethed. I'm okay to talk to now that I have muscles? Fuck her.

Young Walter Hobb adhered to this line of thought for weeks afterwards, during which time Lauren began pursuing him, discreetly at first, but bit-by-bit becoming more aggressive in her method. Each incident wherein she spoke to him only served to aggravate him more. Misguided he may have been, but Hobb's self-assured mettle drove him to swear that the stuck-up chick would never have him.

Fortunately for Hobb, the world is full of liquor.

Lying in wait for him outside his English lit class, Lauren ambushed Hobb, inviting him to a party that very night. He turned Lauren down and blew past her, sighing in exasperation. Something had to be done, the girl was practically stalking him—and, he expected, it was purely so she could shoot him down in some cruel, devious fashion. He might have been overstuffed with confidence, but he still couldn't bring himself to believe that a super-hot girl like Lauren would pursue him so tirelessly if she weren't planning to publicly humiliate him. The party was to be avoided at all costs. If Lauren was going to be there, there was no telling what she might do.

Hobb then found himself fending off an endless stream of people wanting him to go to the party: his roommate Dave, a lanky pothead who knew some dudes who might be carrying: a buck-toothed Norwegian girl who worked in the student union building and smelled like pancake syrup (interesting, Hobb had to admit); three guys from the film department, who had latched onto Hobb when he was the only other person in the theater for a screening of *Dune*; and the janitor cleaning the gym, a failed student who didn't want to leave the school, who had said, "that Lauren chick likes you." He had fought them all off and locked himself in his room (after quite literally kicking Dave in the ass to make him leave), planning to do nothing but watch TV and drink a few whiskey and Cokes.

Hobb was drunk an hour later, by which time, a nice moonlight walk seemed awfully appealing. Hobb shuffled on out of his apartment, led by some mysterious force towards the direction of the campus. He didn't even see the car that hit him until he was sprawled across the hood. Actually, "hit" is not quite the word to describe the incident. He stepped out into the street as the car was turning right—and therefore moving relatively slowly—got clipped in the leg by the bumper, screamed like a girl and hurled himself on the hood. The car's driver was a local celebrity, a psychobilly rockabilly singer and part-time clerk at a porno store, who wore brass knuckles like jewelry and had a penchant for beating up pretty much everybody he crossed paths with. Needless to say, this fellow wasn't particularly pleased to have Hobb lying atop his car and shrieking as if his legs had been severed.

As Hobb was being punched in the face for the third time, another car screeched to a halt and somebody who smelled really good got out, yelling at Rockabilly Porn King to lay off. Hobb, dazed and drunk as he was, only knew that a scuffle took place, during which Rockabilly Porn King got kicked in the balls and flopped to the pavement next to him, wheezing and gasping. Hobb awkwardly slugged him in the head once for good measure, then began the arduous task of climbing to his feet. His sweet-smelling benefactor stepped in to help him, and the rest, as they say, is history.

It was Lauren, of course, on her way to the party. Hobb's immediate reaction, upon realizing this was to puke on Rockabilly Porn King, then accuse Lauren of setting him up. Ignoring his drunken raving, Lauren pushed Hobb into her car and took him back to her place, where she washed his face and set about soothing his fears. When he accused her of only being interested in him after he bulked up, she called him a dope. "But you wouldn't even talk to me until you thought I was, you know, hot," he slurred.

"Hot?" Lauren shook her head disdainfully, "You were hot all along. Hot's a dime a dozen. I figured the only reason you were in the gym

was to pick up girls, which is why I wouldn't talk to you until I knew you had some discipline and some dedication." She threw the damp washcloth at him. "You *are* a dope."

After that, they were only apart during the classes they didn't share. They held out and waited to get married until after graduation, for no real reason except that they felt like they should. She wanted to open a used bookstore and Hobb had taken on two jobs in order to keep their bills paid while the store was finding its feet. During that time, Lauren had been his biggest cheerleader as he fought to get on with the agency, and later helped him through the tough times when he thought he'd never get his own command.

Now, he hoped, she'd help him get through losing it. Burying his face in her hair, he breathed her smell and felt a little twinge at the rather ironic notion that *he* had wound up publicly humiliating her. Couldn't feel too good to have the national news spouting off about the disgraced federal officer whose ring she wore, after all.

Lauren snuffled at his chest for a second, and then lifted her head to look at him. "It's not so bad." She forced a little smile. Surely she didn't mean his face? He gave her a questioning look and gestured at his ugly mug.

Lauren laughed, a deeply pleasing sound for Hobb in his time of need. "No, I mean... that's pretty bad, yeah." Hobb's undamaged eyebrow went up. "But it's gonna be a prettier picture once the swelling goes down," she said. She took a deep breath and nibbled at her lower lip a couple times. "I was talking about the agency. Your... resignation."

"Oh, that," Hobb sneered.

"A career change might not be so bad," Lauren said hopefully. "Something quiet." She carefully trailed a finger along his swollen cheek. "Bank tellers probably only get hit in the face with baseball bats a couple of times a year."

"Bank teller?" Hobb made a show of trembling in horror.

"Or whatever. The point is... I don't mind so much," Lauren said. "It might turn out to be a good thing."

Something stung Hobb then. "Tell that to Rector's wife."

"You can't blame yourself for that," Townsend spoke up

"I sure as hell can. It happened on my watch."

"Because somebody fucked you..." The big man's eyes flicked to Lauren. "Excuse me, Lauren."

"'S'okay, Jeff," Lauren said.

Townsend's eyes went back to Hobb. "Fucked all of us," he hastily added, then his gaze returned to Lauren once more. "Excuse me again."

"Still okay, Jeff."

Townsend returned his attention to Hobb. "I don't think there's a goddamn thing we can do to fight 'em when it comes to making you

resign. but I am sure as hell not about to let them blame you for the men who got killed." Townsend shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "And I'm not gonna let you blame yourself, either."

Hobb's silence prompted Townsend to get to his feet and approach his friend. He lifted a ham-like fist, holding it up expectantly. Hobb made a fist of his own and the two men knocked their knuckles together in brotherhood, a gesture Lauren never quite understood.

"I'm outta here," Townsend said, smiling. "If there's one thing you guys don't need, it's a gorilla on your couch."

Lauren gave him a hug, nearly disappearing within his grip. "Thanks for bringing him back."

"What else was I gonna do with him?" Townsend clapped Hobb on the shoulder and headed for the door, turning to look back as he stepped out. "You might want to drag him to a doctor, Lauren. He got his bell rung pretty good."

She shot him a thumbs-up and Townsend closed the door behind him. Lauren looked at Hobb. "I can't believe you drove across three states while wearing a hospital gown."

Hobb shrugged.

"You want some food?"

"No."

"You want some pants?"

Hobb shook his head. "Nope."

Lauren smiled slyly. "Anything else I can offer you?"

"Whatta you got for sin?"

She took Hobb's hand and led him down the hall to their bedroom.

***

Townsend sighed as he swung open the door of the little car, dreading the thought of wedging himself into the thing once again. The drive from Lamont—all nine hours of it—had exhausted him mentally and physically. His entire body felt like one big cramp. Plus he seriously needed to take a dump. He would have done it at Walter's house, but he didn't want to subject Lauren to the horrible consequences of his lousy diet. He had to do something, though. His apartment was a half-hour drive away, and he wasn't sure he could hold it that long.

Wincing, he began the process of compacting himself behind the steering wheel. Once settled, he looked wistfully at Hobb's house. Walt was really lucky to have someone like Lauren. Hell, just having someone to go home to would be nice.

Townsend considered his options. His clothes were beginning to put out a pretty serious funk and he could use about seventeen hours of sleep, but going home to his empty apartment didn't sound so good.

Damn it. Was his only reason for heading home the need to take a shit? What a beautiful life. Aw hell. The last thing he needed was to get maudlin. Sure he was lonely, but his life wasn't so bad. Well, at least not before the mission had gone south. Still though, some loving female company would be a pleasant change of pace,

He realized he'd been sitting outside Hobb's house for several minutes, just staring out the windshield like some kind of lunatic. If Walt and Lauren hadn't already adjourned to the bedroom, they might be peeking out at him right now, wondering what was wrong with him. He squinted at the windows, trying to see if anyone was watching. Nah, surely Hobb was taking care of business by now. Townsend knew he certainly would be, if he had a wife like Lauren.

Townsend started the car and pulled away from the house. An odd howling sound emanated from his guts, a sure sign that he'd better drop a deuce and fast. All right. He had tried to force the idea down, but why the hell not? It was on the way home, anyway. And who knew? Maybe something would come of it. Ten minutes later, Townsend pulled into a parking space outside Lefty's Lounge. He looked at the clock, trying to figure out who might be working this shift. Could be Rita, maybe Frenchie, if he was lucky. He gave himself the once-over in the rearview, decided he wasn't going to look much better, and unfolded himself from the car.

In any other town, Lefty's would have been a dive. In Jamison, it was merely everyone's second choice. Some greaseball from Richmond had opened an upscale titty bar on the outskirts of town three years back, and Lefty's took the hit. The trucker trade had dried up entirely and all the best looking girls—mostly high-school dropouts with fake IDs—scurried off to find work at the glittery joint, leaving Lefty's with a handful of older gals gyrating their sagging bodies for the remaining assortment of Jamison's various sad sacks and lonely guys like Townsend. Most of the ladies had kids, some of them even worked days at the Shop-Mart department store to make ends meet, only shaking their tired moneymakers in the evening. It should have been a miserably sad place, and maybe it was for the women who worked there, but Townsend loved it. It reminded him of the bar Harvey Keitel hung out at in *Mean Streets*, and that was his favorite movie. Besides, he had a favorite at the joint.

Townsend pushed aside the beaded curtain that hung just inside the doorway and stepped into the club. The faint odor of mildew, buried beneath an assortment of cleaning products, struggled with the clinging aroma of cigarette smoke for dominance. Eleanor was tending bar and shooting the shit with Steve the bouncer, a man who really served no purpose since the bar's customer base had dried up. None of the men who frequented Lefty's were ever looking for trouble, but Lefty

had kept Steve on the payroll because the bouncer would occasionally come by his house and do odd jobs.

Townsend smiled. Looked like he was at least a little bit lucky; Frenchie was on the stage, bumping and grinding with her usual dull rhythm. Shaking her ass was like a factory job for Frenchie, part of her predictable life between six in the evening and closing time. Townsend figured her to be on the bad side of forty, and the days when she might have given it her all in hopes of becoming a featured dancer were long past. Seeing him, she gave a little wave and smile, motivating the three other guys in the place to turn towards him, wondering who had inspired such a ruckus.

Townsend figured he'd better get the pressing business over with and hustled back to the men's room. The can at Lefty's always smelled like camels had been shitting there, so Townsend felt no shame at stinking the place up even worse. With the turmoil in his bowels relieved, he went back out front, taking a seat at a table close to the stage. His timing was good; the song Frenchie was dancing to was fading out, and after snatching up the three or four dollar bills her adoring public had tossed onto the stage, she headed straight for Townsend's table, putting her top back on as she went. Townsend stole one last glance at her bare tits before she covered them up. She was holding up well, that was for sure.

"How you doin', honey?" the sturdy gal purred, her voice the product of too many cigarettes and whiskey. Townsend stood, pulling the chair out for her. She smiled, always pleased by his gentlemanly behavior, and settled her agreeable rump into the chair.

"Been a rough couple of days, Frenchie," said, returning to his seat. "But I can't complain too much."

"Course not, 'cause I'm sittin' with ya." She stuck her tongue out, amused by her own joke.

She was a little rough around the edges to say the least, but goddamn, did Townsend find her sexy. She still sported a fluffy eighties hairdo, like an extra from a Bon Jovi video, and she wore thick black mascara that made the whites of her eyes look like they were glowing. She was a little bit thick in the torso, but that just gave a fella more to hang onto. Besides, her ass was enough to rock a pickup truck off its axles. Didn't matter that she probably had fourteen or fifteen years on him, as he had always liked the MILF types, anyway. First time he got laid was with a middle-aged housewife who lived down the street, bored and horny because her husband worked too much. He had been fourteen at the time. Kind of set him down a particular path, he supposed. Besides, most of the older gals he'd slept with knew how to deliver the goods better than the younger ones.

Frenchie gestured to another dancer leaning against the bar and

indicated for a couple of beers.

"You've gotta quit this job, Frenchie," Townsend said, fidgeting with the ashtray on the table.

"Why's that?" She took the ashtray out of his hands and Townsend felt as if he was a little kid who was touching something he'd been told not to.

"Because you won't date customers."

She smiled at him. "Simple solution, honey, Stop coming in."

Townsend leaned back as the waitress brought the beers. He paid for the drinks and tipped the girl, then waited for her to move out of earshot before speaking again. "I got nowhere else to go."

Frenchie thought he was kidding.

FOUR

The school bus smelled far worse than the little strip mall church ever had. Kelly hated long road trips and had hoped she'd be able to get up and walk back and forth along the length of the bus during the drive, but that quickly became impossible as the congregation crammed themselves into the vehicle. Every seat in the overloaded bus held at least one more ass than it was meant to, and the aisle was packed with little kids and teenagers. Kelly found herself stuffed in about two-thirds of the way back, bracketed by Charlotte Rutherford and a chubby man named either Roger or Robert, she could never remember which. Surprisingly, Roger (or Robert), smelled better than Charlotte, a result of fat guy overcompensation with cologne. Charlotte, a dried-up forty year-old with turn-of-the-century librarian hair, gave off an odor that seemed to be a combination of vinegar and old socks, and it was growing in potency as the drive wore on. Kelly wondered if the woman's pinched, sour expression was in response to her own stench, or if it was merely a sign that she'd never known the touch of a man.

The kids on the bus were chattering excitedly, playing I-spy or otherwise amusing themselves. A number of miles back, they'd broken into a rousing chorus of "One hundred bottles of beer on the wall," but, fortunately, most of them had become bored after seventeen bottles and only a couple of die-hards were still singing and even they had collapsed into a tired, Lou Reed-style muttering.

Charlotte occupied the window seat, and every time Kelly tried to look at the passing scenery the older woman tensed up, her eyes flicking around nervously, as if she thought Kelly was staring at her. Kelly found this vaguely disturbing, and so hadn't been able to enjoy even the simple pleasure of looking out the window. It was a shame, too; the countryside they were passing through was beautiful—the thick trees broken up only by the occasional farmhouse or lush green field of grass. The long drive sure would've been more fun with Meredith riding next to her.

Meredith. The muscles in Kelly's jaw tightened as she thought about the girl riding alone with Curtis Rickles. Twisting in her seat, Kelly strained to look out the back window of the bus. The Scout driven by Don James followed fairly close behind, towing the trailer. If she craned her neck and squinted hard enough, she could make out Long in the passenger seat, his face obscured by shadow. He looked like he might be asleep.

But where was Rickles's pickup truck? She could see the road clearly for about a quarter-mile back until it disappeared behind some trees. Why would he fall so far behind? More importantly, why would Long

let him fall so far behind? The truck was old. Judging from the horrible sounds it made, the thing could break down at any moment, especially towing that generator or whatever it was.

Kelly realized she was breathing hard. Gathering herself, she took a deep breath, slowly exhaling. Long would have taken the truck's shape into consideration. She turned to face the front of the bus again, settling into her seat and trying hard to relax. They'd passed through a little town awhile back; perhaps Rickles and Meredith had stopped for gas, a candy bar or something. She studied Meredith's parents, sitting a half-dozen rows ahead of her. They didn't seem worried—hell, Mrs Host appeared to be peacefully sawing logs, her head lolling back against the seat. Still...

Kelly moved to look out the window again, bumping Charlotte Rutherford with her knee. The older woman grunted a little too loudly, making it clear that she was less than pleased. Needlessly shifting a little more, Kelly put some force behind the knee, deliberately gouging the woman's thigh.

"Ow!" Charlotte yelped, her wrinkled mouth puckering like a sphincter. "Sit still!"

"Sorry, Charlotte. I was just trying to see behind us." Kelly ignored the woman's fussing and twisted to get a better look out the back. On the other side of her, Roger (or Robert) smiled agreeably, not upset in the least about Kelly's ass brushing against him. Still no sign of the truck. Kelly wondered if she should mention it to Travis Hornby, the driver of the bus. As she was about to say something, the truck rounded the corner, way off in the distance. Kelly's body uncoiled. She was being a nut. Sighing softly, she began to turn around, but was tossed against Charlotte as the bus suddenly slowed down.

"Well, good grief!" Charlotte exclaimed. "Maybe you should sit on the floor with the children if you're going to squirm around constantly."

The bus had slowed to make a left turn. Out on the right side, past Charlotte's dour face, was an old cemetery. Kelly stared out at the gravestones as she settled into her seat, bracing herself so as not to further aggravate the grumpy old bitch. "My squirming's done," she said apologetically. As the bus made the turn, Kelly couldn't help but notice that the grayish color of Charlotte's skin coordinated nicely with the weathered tombstones scattered across the cemetery grounds.

Kelly sank into her seat, her gaze traveling across the backs of all the heads arrayed in front of her. What the hell had brought her here, to this place at this time? If she asked Meredith, the girl would tell her it was all part of "God's perfect plan." Kelly would have argued that it was more a result of her own fucked-up judgment. If everything she'd been through in her life was part of "God's perfect plan," then His strategy

involved being particularly nasty to her. What kind of mean-spirited, all-seeing, all-knowing son of a bitch would've included Morgan Patrick in any plan, perfect or otherwise?

Kelly was thirteen when she met Morgan. He was—to her desperate eyes, anyway—a very mature seventeen. Certainly mature enough to manipulate her into giving him a blowjob inside the windmill at the miniature golf course. She instantly fell in love. How could she resist his charms when the boy was a doppelganger for Corey Feldman? This, she would learn the hard way, was one of the many pifalls arising from having one's father take a powder when one is only four years old. She couldn't really blame her dad, though. With her mom being the stone bitch that she was, she figured the poor guy had to either leave or blow his brains out, and in the grand scheme of things, abandonment was no doubt preferable to finding her dad's ravaged corpse splayed out in the living room.

So Morgan Patrick became her secret boyfriend—secret because he insisted it be that way. Somehow that only added to the mystery and excitement, though. Besides, it gave Kelly plenty of fodder for her diary, which, before Morgan came along, she had filled with poems about unicorns and childish tirades about her mother's meanness. She wasn't allowed to speak to Morgan during school (again, his rule), so her burning passion for him would only build and build as she twitched and fidgeted through her classes, struggling to pay attention. It was like waiting for Christmas morning five days a week, and after the final bell she'd race off to the culvert where they secretly met and unwrap her favorite gift, the gift that gave Morgan so much pleasure and, in so doing, made Kelly feel like she had something to give.

He then started to bring his friends. Three of them. Two were from Morgan's class, but one was older, maybe even from high school. Kelly wasn't happy about it; in fact, she hated it. This was their secret love affair, after all. But Morgan wanted his friends to watch, to see how much they loved each other, and she wanted him to be happy, so she went along with it.

After a couple weeks of letting them watch, Morgan decided Kelly should give his friends the gift, too. She cried, but Morgan calmed her down, told her that it proved even more how much she loved him. So she went along with that, too. But just once. She hurt too much afterwards, and her mom found the bloody underpants she'd tried to throw away. Then all hell broke loose. Not for Morgan—Kelly's mom didn't blame Morgan. She only blamed Kelly, Told her she'd brought it on herself and would have to deal with it herself.

Kelly dealt with it by ditching school, but it didn't take long for her mom to find out about that, either. It was the first time her mother called her a whore. Said that's what she was on the path to being: an

uneducated whore. Her mother dragged her back to school, marched her into the principal's office, stuffed something into the pocket of her backpack, and left her standing there. As she waited for her scolding from the principal, Kelly fished into her backpack and extracted the thing her mom had given her. A sandwich bag full of condoms.

It was as if she were giving Kelly the green light to start screwing every guy she met. After having her heart ripped out by Morgan, who refused to speak to her either during or after school, other than to join the club that called her a whore, Kelly swore she would never fall in love with any of the boys she made it with, and assured herself that the pleasure was for her, not for them. She would take from then on, never give.

There's that old saw about "the best laid plans," however, and when Kelly was fifteen, she met Brian Tucker. With his goth-boy sadness, not to mention black fingernails and oh-so sexy eyeliner, the young man was like catnip to Kelly. He was only a year older than her, and unlike the others, sex wasn't the first thing he asked or expected from her. What Brian seemed to like was simply being with her, whether it was lounging around his bedroom listening to depressing CDs—while posters of Robert Smith, Siouxsie Sioux, Trent Reznor and Morrisey stared down at them—or wandering the mall and freaking out the normal folk. In fact, the first time she had made a serious move on him, unfastening his studded belt and cramming her hand down his pants, Brian put a stop to the shenanigans right away. He didn't want it "to be about that," he had said, making Kelly's tummy flutter. The boy really, truly cared about her, for her, not just for her mouth or what was in her pants. It was a Kelly Mills record of four and a half weeks before they finally had sex, and Brian just held her and kissed her for almost two hours afterwards. Hell, he might have even cried a little.

But nothing so beautiful could ever survive the parents. Sure enough, about two days after Kelly and Brian celebrated their six-month anniversary, Brian's mom and dad excitedly told their son that they were moving to New Zealand, of all places. To Kelly, it might as well have been the moon. She toyed with the idea of running away, following her true love to the ends of the earth, but where the hell was a fifteen year-old girl going to come up with plane fare to Auckland?

With The Smiths blaring from the portable CD player in Brian's otherwise empty bedroom, and tears streaming down their faces, the two made their vows to stay in touch and never forget each other. Kelly jabbed her finger with a razor-edged knife and wrote her name in blood on Brian's Cocteau Twins T-shirt, then stood on the lawn next to the sold sign and watched as the cab took Brian and his parents away for good. She wrote him a letter a day for the next three weeks. She got one letter in return. He was probably a goddamned used car salesman by

now, spouting off his come-ons in a phony Kiwi accent.

Of course, Kelly wasn't in much of a position to throw stones. Here she was in her pretty little sundress, crammed into a stinky old school bus headed off to Christ knows where, because one day a few months ago she had wandered drunkenly into a tiny strip mall church looking for some kind of point to it all and had gotten a big schoolgirl crush on the preacher. Father Long, father figure. If she could see the pattern so clearly, why did she keep falling into it? Maybe the big guy up in the clouds actually *did* have some kind of perfect plan, and her tipsy evening's visit to the ministry was all part of it. Don't they always say you have to hit rock bottom before you can begin clawing your way back up? If she hadn't wallowed in the muck during her tenure as girlfriend of Dickie "Douchebag" West, then she wasn't sure she could survive seeing the real bottom.

Dickie was a radio DJ, hence his stunningly witty nickname. She had met him at a bar. She still had vague memories of sucking him off in the alley behind the place, but to this day she wasn't sure if it had actually happened or if it was merely an alcohol-fueled plan of attack that never came to fruition. She had questioned Dickie about it, but he had been so drunk that night that he didn't remember meeting her at all, and had only called her because he found her phone number written on a napkin that had been wadded up and stuffed into his underwear. All in all, it was probably not the finest foundation for a successful relationship. They had immediately begun fucking like rabid apes every chance they got, and after a few fairly pleasant days of such behavior, the fighting began. Pretty much par for the course for one of Kelly's love affairs. She only got fed up when Dickie kicked his way through the living room window of her apartment one night, and punched her in the face two or three times. Okay, six or seven times, but who's counting?

One restraining order later, things didn't seem so bad. Kelly and Dickie even had a handful of civil phone conversations, leading her to believe that he wanted to make things work. He then showed up at her apartment, drunk and sporting an erection. That's when Kelly discovered that a restraining order is sometimes a little less effective than a floor lamp (when wielded properly). Granted, Dickie wound up being a little less pretty after they stitched up his face, but she liked to think the scar would make him seem more masculine to the other inmates.

Watching the guys from the glass shop replace her apartment windows, Kelly swore off men and alcohol one more time. She broke the vow within a week, and driving home after another one night stand (well, one afternoon stand, to be more accurate), she saw a handful of people milling around outside the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel. She

had driven past the place dozens of times, never really paying much attention to it other than to feel sad for the people who went to church in a run-down strip mall, but this time she felt compelled to stop. She tried to tell herself that it was merely a safe haven until the slight buzz she was nursing had a chance to wear off. She sure as hell didn't want another DUI on her record, after all, but something else was slithering around deep inside her, something that didn't want to make any more long drives home, her makeup ruined by tears and various pieces of her underwear left behind on the field of battle.

She had sat in her car for what seemed an eternity before working up the courage to go inside—partly out of the absurd fear that upon entering the place, she'd somehow be instantly stricken with Christianity and no longer enjoy sex, swearing or movies on Cinemax. Instead of shrieking pod-people pointing accusingly at her, however, she'd been met by sweet-natured folks who didn't seem interested in forcing her to think like them at all. For the first time she could remember, nobody looked at her as if she was a whore or an unclean intruder.

And Father Long...? Well, he had welcomed her with open arms. God's perfect plan? Perhaps. The months of churchin' since then really didn't seem to have much effect on her thought processes, but she did believe that she'd become a better person. Or at least a more focused person. She'd only been drunk once since she had attended her first sermon, and she'd managed to get through the experience without going down on anybody or putting her fist through a wall. Kelly had made an effort to clean up her act, and was so far succeeding better than she had expected. So who really cared if, taken collectively, the congregation didn't smell particularly good? They were good people, and that's all that mattered.

"Long drives can really hypnotize you, can't they?"

Kelly snapped out of her trance, looking over at Roger (or Robert). The fat fellow smiled pleasantly at her.

"I was just thinking about stuff," Kelly said. "The future."

"Yeah," he said. "I know what you mean."

Kelly told herself she was going to get the man's name straight and remember it, even if it killed her.

The bus shook, bouncing the passengers around as it turned off the two-lane blacktop highway and onto a dirt road. From where she sat, Kelly couldn't see the weather beaten, arched sign the bus passed under. Some letters were missing, but it wasn't difficult to see what it once read.

Camp Crystal Lake.

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Mr Rickles kept talking and asking her questions, but even though it was kind of impolite, Meredith was trying not to say much in return. It wasn't so bad at first, but after they'd been on the road for a while, it seemed as if Mr Rickles found a way to turn everything she said into something... dirty. Not in a specific way—he was almost sneaky about it, as if he had a hidden agenda. Like, if she were to tell her mom and dad some of the stuff he'd said to her, they'd probably say she just misunderstood what Mr Rickles had meant. It made her angry, partly because the way he did it made *her* wonder if she wasn't just taking it the wrong way. She felt stupid, and she hated that.

It was the one thing she didn't like about Kelly. She was completely cool in every other way, but sometimes she treated Meredith like she was a naive little kid. Her parents had kept her pretty sheltered, sure, but she knew a thing or two. In fact, there were some things about Meredith that might just surprise Kelly. And she was planning on doing some surprising very soon...

Kelly's arrival at the church had been something of an answered prayer for Meredith. There were kids her own age in the congregation, but nobody she could really talk to. When Kelly came along, they hit it off right away. They liked a lot of the same bands, although Meredith had sworn Kelly to secrecy about this; her parents would have a seizure if they knew she listened to Marilyn Manson. They could talk for hours without it ever feeling forced or phony, like it did with a lot of adults. The only time it became uncomfortable was when Kelly talked about boys. When Kelly went off like that, Meredith started to feel like she did now, trying not to talk to Mr Rickles.

"We're gettin' close now." Mr Rickles sounded kind of like Daffy Duck, lisping on the word "close."

Meredith stared at the little wedge of false teeth resting on the truck's dashboard. Rickles had inserted his dentures back at the church, but had pulled them out a few hours ago, saying that they were uncomfortable. He had disgustingly slithered his tongue around on his smooth pink gums, giving Meredith a look that assured her he'd rather be slithering that ole' mouth lizard around on her. The missing teeth made his upper lip sink in, which made his lips appear to be pursed and goofy. It was really creepy when he'd smile. She tried not to look at him very much.

"Y'know there's swimmin', don'tcha?" Rickles sputtered. "A whole lake."

"Yeah?" Meredith looked out the window, away from Rickles. She wondered if Kelly missed her at all on the bus. "That's pretty cool."

Meredith caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Mr Rickles had put his hand down on the truck's bench seat, near her leg. It was too close for comfort—she was practically pressed against the

passenger door—and the way his hand was sort of twitching around made her think he wanted to put it right on her thigh to have a good rub and squeeze. As casually and polite as possible, she tried to scoot further away.

Rickles let out a moist chuckle, his upper lip flapping with the laugh. "Lake's so big, you could probably run off and go skinny-dipping, y'wanted to. No one would ever know."

This was one of those moments where Meredith chose to say nothing at all. She wished she was on the bus.

"Y'ever go skinny-dipping?" His hand shifted on the seat again, wanting to go exploring for smooth female flesh. Meredith feared that anything she said might serve as an invitation. "D'you hear?" Mr Rickles wanted an answer.

"Huh? Sorry, I was daydreaming about that old farmhouse." She smiled back, hoping her feigned ignorance would help steer the subject in another direction. Unfortunately, the smile brought one in return. She could see the pink tip of Rickles's tongue worming in and out between his bottom teeth and his empty upper gum. "I always thought it'd be nice to live in a farmhouse like that," she added hopefully.

"Well, you'll be livin' in something close where we're bound," he said, his eyes studying the road ahead.

It had been like this for hours, Rickles discreetly picking away at Meredith, while she repeatedly sidestepped from a difficult confrontation. The whole business left her exhausted, but the last thing she was willing to do was let her guard down by falling asleep. Especially after the stop they had made an hour or so back...

Mr Rickles had taken his foot off the gas pedal, allowing the bus and the other car to get so far ahead she couldn't even see their dust trails in the far distance. He claimed it was to ease the burden on his old pickup, but just like everything else that poured out of his creepy, toothless mouth, Meredith knew that wasn't the whole truth. Then, when they couldn't see the bus at all anymore, he pulled off at a gas station so they could have a bathroom break. She was grateful for it, because she'd felt like she was going to wet her panties for the last half hour, but didn't want to say anything for fear of the talk it might generate.

The entrances to both restrooms were around the back of the building, and Mr Rickles had walked with her, going kind of slow and shadowing her. She felt uncomfortable, as if his eyes were on her the whole time, penetrating her. Running the last few feet to the door, she charged into the ladies' room and slid the bolt shut behind her. She could hear the sound of Mr Rickles's boots approaching, followed by the men's room door opening and closing.

Meredith waited by the door for a second, her breathing shallow and

quiet. She felt stupid and paranoid. Turning away, she took stock of the situation. It was a reasonably clean toilet facing the door. She unzipped her jeans and slid them down, plopping her butt down on the painted wooden seat. The sensation of finally relieving her aching bladder made her feel a little light-headed, and it sounded as if she was spraying a garden hose into the toilet.

She then saw a shadow move across the inch-wide gap at the bottom of the bathroom door. She sucked in a breath. Someone had stepped up next to the door, standing so close they had to be almost pressed against it. Listening to her pee. She tried to squeeze and stop the flow, but was only able to slow it to a trickle. Instead, she shifted on the seat, trying to make it dribble down the inside of the bowl.

Whoever was out there didn't move a muscle. Meredith could almost sense someone straining to hear what she was doing. Abruptly, she flushed the toilet, and at the whooshing sound, the figure at the door took off running. Meredith sat there for a long moment before she felt brave enough to wipe herself. Then, keeping her eyes on the gap beneath the door, she stood and pulled up her pants.

There was nobody to be seen when she opened the door. Rounding the building, she saw Rickles busily washing the truck's windshield. He acted completely unconcerned with Meredith, like he was suddenly not interested in her after spending hours trying to find a way to say and do naughty things to her. She looked around. The only other people at the gas station were two old men, one of them fiddling around under the hood of a broken-down car, the other sitting nearby and badgering the first.

It took all of her courage to climb back in the truck with Mr Rickles, but she had done what she had to and was proud of herself for being so strong. Reflecting on the previous situation, Meredith realized that even the bathroom thing was something she couldn't prove. She wasn't sure if it had actually been Rickles out there, listening to her piss. It was all way too creepy and confusing—she just wanted to get where they were going and be away from Rickles. She wondered if she should tell Kelly about everything that had happened, or just keep her mouth shut. It'd probably be more mature if she didn't say anything.

"Lookit that, lookit that," Rickles said, nodding towards the windshield. "Almost home."

Meredith looked up ahead in time to see the bus turn off the road, followed by the other truck that Father Long was in. She was still mad at Long for making her ride with Mr Rickles, but she also knew that he wouldn't have asked her to do it if it wasn't important. And he sure wouldn't have put her alone with some kind of pervert. She must've been taking everything the wrong way. She'd just look dumb if she said anything. Then Kelly would really have a reason to treat her like a naive

little kid.

As Rickles slowed down to make the turn onto the dirt road, Kelly saw the old sign for Camp Crystal Lake arching overhead. She recognized the name from somewhere, but wasn't sure why. "Is that where we're going?"

"Camp Blood," Rickles said in his best spooky voice. He gave Meredith another toothless grin. "Don't you worry—you get scared, you just come find Curtis and I'll take care of ya."

She wanted to say that she was scared already. She almost asked him why he called it "Camp Blood," but thought better of it.

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Don James shook Father Long awake just before they reached the turn-off to Camp Crystal Lake. Long's excitement had kept him going for hours, but lack of sleep the previous night finally caught up with him and he went out like a light, thirty or so miles back.

"Thank you, Don," Long yodeled through a yawn. "I would've been mad at myself if I'd missed this."

"And mad at me if I had let you miss it," Don said. "You've worked way too hard for this. I knew you'd want to see the bus roll under that sign."

With a contented smile on his face, Long watched as the bus made the turn ahead of them. He wondered if any of the others shared the extent of his happiness. The Scout slowed and Don spun the steering wheel, taking them off the highway and onto the dirt road. Long leaned forward in his seat, eyes glued to the Camp Crystal Lake sign as they passed beneath it.

"We're home," he whispered. Suddenly, Long flung himself back in his seat and exuberantly slapped Don on the shoulder. "Praise Jesus, the flock has come home!"

"Amen, Father," Don said. "Amen."

Long rolled down his window and stuck his head out, in an attempt to watch Curtis Rickles drive under the sign, but the old pickup truck was still some distance down the highway. Instead, Long turned his face upwards to the tree-shrouded sky, watching the sunlight burst through the openings in the leaves. He sucked in a deep, cleansing breath. Fresh, forest air—no more car exhaust and garbage stink. Another sign, ahead on the right, caught his eye.

"Camp Crystal Lake, established 1935," Long read. "I say we find a member of the congregation with a steady hand. Maybe John Sullivan, I seem to remember he had a knack with our bake sale signs. Have him add a little something to that." Long gathered himself theatrically. "Home of the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel." The father held his hand in front of himself as he spoke, imagining the words spilling across the sign. He fixed Don with a satisfied grin. "What say you?"

"Sounds sweet, Father. I can put John on that right away, you just give me the go-ahead."

"Consider it given."

His elbow cocked jauntily out the window, Long settled back and enjoyed the somewhat bumpy ride. The dirt road leading to the campground hadn't been used much in recent years, for obvious reasons, and had fallen into disrepair. Grass and weeds grew thickly along the center mound between the deep ruts, tall enough to scrape the underside of the Scout as it bounced along. Don slowed the vehicle to avoid giving the trailer too much of a beating. Ahead of them, the old school bus swayed crazily from side to side, slowly making its way through the furrows. One of the first chores they'd have to tend to would be smoothing that road, Father Long thought.

The preacher's anticipation grew, spurred by the slow going during this final stretch. The taste, Long told himself, would only be sweeter. He closed his eyes, letting his head bob around with the movement of the Scout. When he opened them again, the campground was coming into view, as was the lake beyond it.

"Praise Jesus," Long said again.

The road beneath them smoothed as it widened into the parking area at Camp Crystal Lake. The school bus rolled to a stop near the main building and Long watched as the vehicle's doors opened like the sandwiched fabric of an accordion. The kids were the first ones to disembark, squealing with glee and leaping onto the moist dirt, scurrying off in every direction to begin their exploration of their new home.

The first adults were stepping off the bus as the Scout pulled up nearby. Long had his door open and was disembarking from the old truck before it could come to a complete stop.

"Welcome! Welcome!" he shouted to his followers. His voice echoed across the still surface of Crystal Lake.

The people who had climbed off the bus stood around stretching, shaking off the long drive, while the others continued to leave the vehicle. Watching them pour out, Father Long was reminded of a clown car at the circus—he couldn't believe they'd been able to cram everyone aboard. Some of the older folks looked a little worse for wear, but overall, the congregation seemed cheerful. He felt his face light up as Kelly Mills appeared in the bus's doorway. The trip had to have exhausted her, but she returned his smile.

She was the one Long was worried about. He just wasn't sure the woman would pass the test without some serious work on her faith, but that was one of the reasons he so enjoyed having her amongst the flock. She represented a true challenge to his abilities as a man of God, a shepherd of the Lord's way. Long felt like he—with the Lord's

invaluable help, of course—had come a long way towards lifting the woman up from the depths of sin she'd been wallowing in. And she certainly seemed eager to further her progress.

As the last members of the congregation left the bus, the truck driven by Curtis Rickles finally arrived. Long watched as Meredith practically leapt from the pickup truck and high-tailed it towards Kelly, giving the older girl a big hug. Probably not an indication that Rickles and the girl had bonded during the drive. He'd have to apply a little personal attention to that situation, guide things along if he could. Rickles was a good man, who worked hard for the ministry.

Stepping off the bus, Mark Brody approached Father Long, his hand outstretched. "We made it!" Brody exclaimed, grinning widely. Long accepted the hand and shook it vigorously. Brody was in his mid-forties, ebony-skinned and covered in ropy muscle. He was one of the very first members of the church, showing up for every sermon back when only two or three others did the same. "We made it," Brody repeated. The two men looked around at the collection of rustic cabins that would be their new home. "This place has quite a history, doesn't it?"

Father Long nodded. "And now we're a part of it."

Brody's expression clouded. Long could see the man was struggling with something. "Do you think we're really the ones?" Brody finally asked, fixing Long with a dark-eyed, searching stare. "That we're... that we're virtuous enough?"

"I'm not the one to ask," Long said, giving a heavenward nod of his head. He smiled at Brody, but the man's questioning gaze remained. "I believe many of us are, or we wouldn't have been led here."

Brody didn't seem so sure. "When you say 'many of us'... Well, I, I'm trying not to be scared. I had my wilder days when I was a younger man."

Father Long put an arm around the man's broad shoulders. "Which one of us didn't? We're human, Mark, not divine. We've all made our mistakes. What's important is that we learn from them. There's no need to fear the Lord's judgment, if you walk the righteous path."

Brody considered Long's words, then nodded rapidly. "Thank you, Father. I'll do my best." Glancing around, he forced a smile and changed the subject. "Looks like we've got our work cut out for us."

"Indeed we do," Long said, returning the smile. "So I say we get to it!" He reassuringly slapped Brody on the back, and the man hurried off to join a handful of others who were already at work untying the tarps that strapped the baggage to the top of the bus.

As the business of unloading vehicles and getting the congregation settled in began to swirl around him, Long surveyed the buildings scattered through the camp. Brody was right; they definitely had their

work cut out for them. Camp Crystal Lake's better days had come and gone a long time ago, thanks to its rather unique history, and there wasn't a cabin on the property that didn't need repairs and tender loving care—in some cases extensively. There had been an attempt at creating a resort development on the other side of the lake a few years back, but sales on the properties were almost non-existent and the developers had thrown in the towel. Dozens—maybe hundreds of—murders would have that effect, Father Long thought. Nobody in their right mind wanted to live at Camp Blood.

Long, however, saw those murders through a different prism. The preacher strolled away from his busy flock, wandering throughout the cluster of cabins to examine them. He had been through each and every building when he and Rickles came down to purchase the lease on the campground, but he felt something now that he hadn't experienced previously. A connection to the property, somehow.

The main cabin was still in decent shape. It was the one the realtor used to entertain potential clients, after all. Long laughed softly. The woman had bemoaned her burden of being assigned the Camp Crystal Lake property—she'd told Long and Rickles that she imagined it was even worse than having to convince someone to rent the Amityville house, or Ed Gein's abode in Wisconsin. When Rickles had pointed out that the Gein house had burned down before it could be put up for auction, the realtor told them she wished the same thing would happen to Camp Crystal Lake. Like so many others, she simply could not see the truth, even when it was laid out before her.

Father Long paused for a moment, looking up at the big cabin. Could use a little work on the roof. He had noticed some evidence of leaks in the big room when he'd signed the paperwork. The bedrooms upstairs, where he and Rickles would make their quarters were sound, and the kitchen was fully functional. The wiring was a different matter, although the realtor had assured Long that it was fine throughout the campground.

The wiring. Long frowned. He'd completely forgotten to buy fuel for the camp's emergency generator, and the power lines from the town were long dead. He'd have to send Rickles or Don James back into town to buy a few cans, or they'd be cooking their Dinty Moore beef stew over a campfire tonight.

Moving on, Father Long passed the building where the restrooms and showers were housed. A corner of the roof had collapsed in the shower stalls, but once the debris was cleared away, most of the showers would be perfectly usable until repairs could be made. Water was supplied by the lake, and the pipes all seemed to be in decent working order. No hot water until the generator was up and running, though. It wasn't a huge concern; some of the more poverty-stricken

members of the congregation hadn't had hot water back in the city, but Long hoped to be a better provider for them.

A squirrel poked up through the hole in the roof and cocked its head to stare at Long. The preacher paused, watching. After a moment, the little animal scurried across the roof, stopping at the edge and glancing around before finally leaping onto a nearby tree branch and disappearing into the foliage. Long smiled affably and continued his tour.

Most of the guest cabins only required a good scrub and cleaning. Three of the windows had been smashed in one cabin, but the shutters could be closed. Replacing the windows would be a luxury, something they might be able to do once they'd raised some money through craft sales or performing odd jobs in town. Long planned to recruit the younger members of the flock for that duty. He figured he'd have Don drive bunch of them into town once a week to knock on doors, see what they might do in the way of yard work and what not for a few extra dollars.

Finally, Long came to the building that had once served as the cafeteria, and as a place for indoor games when the weather was bad. It would hold the entire congregation, with plenty of room to grow. Long expected more children, after all, and new converts would surely arrive once word got out about the ministry's good work. He climbed the steps and walked across the creaky wooden porch. The cabin's door was locked. Fishing in his pocket, he pulled the key ring the realtor had given him and tried a few until he found the one that worked. Pushing the door open, Long stepped into his church.

Sunlight wrestled its way in through the filth-encrusted windows, illuminating the dust that swirled in the air, suitably cathedral-like for a decrepit old cabin, Long thought. There was a broken window at the back of the room, where a tree branch had grown through the window frame and shattered the glass, but, other than that, damage was minimal. Be easy enough to saw off the branch and board up the window. Eventually, Long thought he'd like to construct a real altar at the head of the room, but, like replacing the broken windows, that was a luxury that could come later.

Lord, what a church he was going to have!

"Father?"

Lost in his reverie, the word sent Long leaping skyward. He spun to see who had come up behind and surprised him.

Kelly Mills stood on the porch, burying an embarrassed giggle behind her hand. "I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean to scare you."

Long heaved a deep breath. "You just startled me, that's all. I thought I was alone."

"You're never alone with the Lord, right?" She stepped into the

doorway and looked around the large room.

That was the problem with the girl; Long knew she meant no harm, but comments like that one expressed a distinct lack of respect for the faith. He wasn't quite sure why she had been willing to make the sacrifices the other members of the congregation had made, but he understood what it was to search for the greater good and he intended to help guide Kelly's spiritual journey as best he could.

"Is this going to be the church?" she asked.

The woman had positioned herself in front of a window, where the meager sunlight filtered through her pale sundress, delineating the shape of her thighs behind the thin fabric. Long turned away, feeling a twinge of guilt for having observed the admittedly interesting phenomenon for what appeared to be a shameful length of time. "Do you like it?" he asked, smiling as he gazed around the huge cabin.

"It's nice," Kelly said. "And it sure smells better than the old place." Long turned towards her again. She fidgeted with her skirt for a moment, unconsciously pulling the fabric tight around the graceful curve of her hips. Long closed his eyes. Perhaps the Lord had sent the woman as a test of his own virtue, as much as of his ability to shepherd his flock. When the preacher opened his eyes again, he was looking at Kelly's face. "I have to admit, I'm a little... well, weirded-out, I guess. By this place." She indicated the entire campground. "And... by what happened back at the old church."

"If you're here, then you feel you can trust me, right?" Long asked.

"I think... I mean, yes." Her eyes softened as she stared at him. "I trust you."

He stepped towards her, taking her hand in both of his. Her palm was damp, like a nervous schoolgirl's. "Then I intend to be worthy of your trust. Of everyone's." Long realized Kelly was holding her breath. This is not apprehension, he thought. How had he not noticed this before? "The questions that are eating away at you will be answered soon, I promise."

Kelly drew a slow, shuddering breath, her eyes locked on Long's. "Oh," she said softly, remembering something. "Don wanted me to find you. He wants to know where he should park the trailer."

Long felt an inexplicable surge of relief. "Let's go tell him." He gently placed a hand on Kelly's shoulder as they left the building, then quickly withdrew it, suddenly feeling nervous about making physical contact with the girl. He wondered if her actions—standing between him and the sunlight, toying with her skirt in such a slyly erotic manner—weren't deliberate after all. Maybe she truly was here to test him. He would have to be vigilant; he couldn't afford to allow himself even a moment of sinfulness, not even in his heart. Such a thing could wreck all he'd worked for.

When they rejoined the others, Long was exceedingly grateful to see Kelly get waylaid by Meredith, who dragged her off to look at a group of baby ducks on the lake. Long watched the two girls for a moment, then lifted his hands, thumb tips together, and squinted at the framed view through one eye, like a movie director.

"I'm guessing you want this taken someplace special," Don James said, cocking a thumb at the trailer as he strode toward Long.

"Come here," Long said, still peering at the image framed between his hands. "Take a look at this."

Don stepped up next to the father and leaned in to check out the view. Meredith had kicked off her shoes and was tip-toeing barefoot at the water's edge, while Kelly picked up a rock and skimmed it across the lake. "That'd be real pretty hanging over your couch," Don said.

Long titled the portrait in his head: "The Lure of the Wicked." Sin amidst beauty, as was so often the case with God's plan for mankind. The preacher lowered his hands. "And there it is right in front of us." He beamed at the other man. "Don't you love the way this place brings out the truth in life?"

From Don's little half-smile, Father Long could see that he didn't understand what he meant. Turning away from the tableau, the two men piled into the Scout and Don drove the truck deeper into the campground, pulling up in front of the old cafeteria.

"There's a storeroom inside, at the back of the building," Long said, getting out of the truck. "I think we should keep the guns in there. We'll put a lock on the door to keep the kids out."

Don opened the tailgate and together they wrestled a large, padlocked wooden crate from the bed of the Scout. Long had asked his followers to sell off their unnecessary belongings, but he didn't think guns fell into that category. The congregation would be making a go of it in the wild, for one thing; and besides, if whatever craft items the group made didn't exactly sell like hotcakes, they might have to feed themselves the old-fashioned way. Long thought those ducks drifting peacefully on the lake would make a tasty meal, if it came down to it.

And, of course, there was the matter of defense. Some people in town had expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of having new residents at Camp Crystal Lake. Long wasn't sure how far those folks might go, but if somebody threatened the congregation, well, the congregation just might threaten back. So they'd collected whatever guns everyone owned, coming up with over a dozen hunting rifles of various makes and a good number of handguns, ranging from cheap Saturday-Night Specials to a well cared for Glock. Long didn't know much about guns, except that when a bunch of them were thrown together in a box, they weighed a lot.

Long and James lugged the heavy crate up the steps and into the big

cabin. Both men were out of breath by the time they'd carried it to the storeroom. "I'd like you to get the new lock put on this door right away," Long said, panting. "The last thing we need is old Mr Host shooting himself in the leg trying to keep the squirrels out of the kitchen or something." They both laughed. "We'll park the trailer around back, then you can get to work on that."

Don drove the Scout to the back of the cafeteria building, then grabbed a tool belt and a bag of locks, hasps and various other supplies they'd purchased and returned to the storeroom inside.

Long, alone with the trailer, felt a tingling electrical charge run up his spine. He exhaled sharply and looked around. He could hear the excited voices of the congregation carried through the trees, but he was definitely by himself out here. Pulling his key ring once again, he flicked through the keys until he came to the one that would unlock the trailer. Long turned the key in his hand, watching as the sunlight sifted through the trees and sparkled off the brass. How could he resist?

Long walked to the back of the trailer and unlocked it, looking around one more time to ensure his solitude. Then he opened the trailer door. The nauseating wave of stench that erupted from within was like a boot to the face, literally rocking Father Long on his heels. It had been a long drive in the summer heat, after all.

Suddenly, Long—with hands on knees—bent down to vomit. Thankfully, the trailer door clunked shut. With a few deep breaths, Long managed to fight the urge to puke a half-digested hamburger. After a moment to collect himself, he stood upright and swung the trailer door open again, peering inside.

The body was wrapped in canvas, bound with thick rope. More ropes ran from the figure to the trailer’s walls, preventing the precious cargo from being jostled around. The wooden beams of the cross the corpse had been strapped to occupied the trailer as well, bound together and tied to the base of the left wall. Uncontrollably, Long gagged at the odor again and pressed his forearm to his face, breathing through his shirtsleeve. He then climbed into the trailer, the door swinging shut behind him.

FIVE

Curtis Rickles didn't feel like helping unload the baggage from atop the bus. Truth be known, he didn't feel like much of anything, except maybe dog shit.

Bitterly, he stared at Meredith, as the young girl frolicked at the lake's edge with that whore, Kelly Mills. Kelly the cocksucker. He wished Father Long would step in, give Meredith some task to perform or send Kelly off to clean the goddamn toilets or something, anything to keep that slut away from Meredith. Didn't the good father realize how impressionable a young girl can be? Young. That was the key word, as far as Rickles was concerned. He'd had more than enough of trampy broads his own age, nasty-tempered, used-up and demanding, expecting him to go out of his way to keep them satisfied, but never doing goddamn diddly when it came to satisfying him.

A girl like Meredith, though... Now she was ripe as a sweet piece of fruit. And like he said, impressionable. Still at an early enough age where a man could train her how to be a good wife. Good when it came to tending a house and good in the fine arts of the bedroom, too. Yeah, they had it all figured out back in frontier times, Rickles considered. Get 'em while they're young, somewhere between thirteen and seventeen, then educate them in the proper care, feeding and fucking of a man. Because once they hit eighteen and get all independent on your ass, they're basically useless from that point on; unless you get one of them drunk enough. Then you can just fuck 'em and forget 'em. And the ones with college educations are the absolute hell-spawned worst of the bunch.

Rickles caught himself rubbing his thumb back and forth across his toothless upper gum. It was a bad habit, and one he intended to break. He could tell Meredith thought his toothless pie-hole was disgusting, and he wished he could've kept his dentures in during the drive to Camp Crystal Lake, but the damned things hurt so badly he just couldn't take it. Fucking military dentist.

Rickles's lips pulled back in a pink, wormy smile. He'd bet whatever money he had left that Meredith could ease his pain, at least for a while. He watched as she splashed out into the water up to her knees, trying to convince the whore to follow her out. If he had any kind of luck, she'd fall in, get her shirt wet, and then he'd get a better look at her breasts. He couldn't believe the girl was only seventeen and sporting a set of knockers like that. Goddamn hormones in the fast food or something. Girls weren't built like that when he was in school, except for Junie Rhodes and she was a bitch hog. Even as an inexperienced kid he knew Junie was riding the peckers of every boy in class, but she didn't have the time of day for ole Curtis. He wished he

could punch her smug face right now.

He had so badly wanted things to go well on the drive out; wanted to make Meredith understand that he was there for her, she could come to him for anything, all she had to do was ask and he'd take care of it. He just couldn't find the damn words to explain his feelings, tell her how much she meant to him. Instead he had just babbled like a fool. A perfect opportunity handed to him by Father Long and he had screwed it all up. Typical.

Sighing, Rickles turned away from the object of his affection, realizing he'd better get his ass in gear or he was going to disappoint Father Long. Besides, like a great man once said, time was on his side. Out here in the wilderness, he supposed he didn't have to worry about much coming between him and Meredith. All he had to do was keep working on the young lady, sweet talk her whenever he could, do nice things for her... She'd come around, sooner or later—although, judging from his wood throbbing against his leg, it had better be sooner, 'cause that thing was known to be demanding. He might just have to go against God's word and spill his seed on the ground real soon, just to ease the torment a little. Maybe once the sun went down, he'd slip off into the woods, dial up Meredith's image on the old masturbation Rolodex, and let off a little steam. If they were anywhere but here, and if his heart didn't belong to another, he'd even think about making that Kelly whore do what she was best suited for. He doubted it would take much to coax her down onto her knees.

Rickles limped towards the school bus. As if the ache in his crotch wasn't bad enough, his foot was bothering him again, or what was left of it, anyway. Must be the damp air out here. He wondered if Meredith had heard the real story, if she knew how he'd lost his teeth and most of his left foot. Rickles tried to ease the humiliation by reminding himself that he'd been wounded while serving his country in Kuwait, and that made it a combat injury. So what if he'd only tripped over a gas can, knocked his teeth out on a wall and shot himself in the foot, when the sudden pain in his mouth made him squeeze the trigger on his rifle? Purple Heart, baby. Purple Heart.

Pushing his way through the crowd until he stood at the side of the school bus, Rickles waited for Mark Brody to toss a bag down to him from the roof. Maybe later on, when everything was unloaded and all the church members were getting settled into their cabins, he'd dig out that old Purple Heart and show the medal to Meredith. Who knew? Some chicks really went for that sort of thing. Maybe it would inspire her to pay some attention to his aching purple helmet. Rickles smiled at the thought, his tongue jutting out from beneath his toothless gums. If he was lucky, he wouldn't have to settle for jerking off.

***

Father Long was alone with the Vessel. The trailer roof wasn't high enough for Long to stand upright, so he held himself bent over, his head and shoulders cocked at an uncomfortable angle. Afraid to move. No, not afraid. Long didn't fear the Vessel. What he felt was *reverence*. With the door closed, the heat and stench inside the trailer were appalling, enveloping Long like a thick blanket. The sweat that had immediately risen on his skin only increased his discomfort.

He was holding his breath. How long now? Minutes? Or only seconds? His face reddening, his heartbeat thudded in his temples, begging him to release the oxygen he held in his lungs. Take a breath. Long fought the desire. His muscles trembled.

The air exploded from his lungs. Mouth wide, he sucked in a deep breath of the grave, horrible and decayed. Of meat rotting in the sun. Of sour sweat and musty fabric and something else, something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

What does sin smell like?

Then the contents of his stomach erupted. Long stumbled as he spewed the pleasant lunch they'd had at the roadside diner all over the trailer wall. Then his breakfast came up. Then there was nothing left but bile, and still his stomach wrenched and twisted, struggling to disgorge every last thing it held.

Long collapsed to the trailer floor, his hands splattering in the puddle of vomit. His sweating had subsided, replaced by an icy-cold trembling. Reluctantly, he allowed himself a short gulp of the foul air. He was repaid with another bout of dry heaving, his body wracking itself violently. A quivering string of spittle ran from his lower lip to the mess on the trailer floor. He found he could tolerate a few quick breaths, but held each one for as long as possible. Still on hands and knees, his head hanging low, Long turned to look at the cloth-wrapped figure of the Vessel.

Curtis Rickles had found the body. The two men had come to sign the lease for the campground, and stayed to explore after the realtor had left. Father Long never imagined that he'd be so fortunate—that God would deem him worthy of such a gift—but Crystal Lake had offered its son. That was when Long knew that he and his followers had truly been chosen.

Murders. That's what people believed the deaths had been. Long knew better.

The answer had come to him years earlier, and his research had borne out his beliefs. *Sinners*. They were sinners, one and all. Unrepentant, flagrantly breaking the laws laid upon mankind by the Lord Himself.

And the Lord, in his righteousness and fury, had sent His hand to cleanse the way. Jason Voorhees wasn't a murderer. He was an avenging angel.

So began the church, the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel. So began Long's mission.

Shaking and convulsing, he crawled over next to the body. Raising himself to his knees, Long wiped his hands on his pants and placed them atop the canvas. Tears of joy poured down his face. "Soon," he whispered. "Soon."

***

By the time Walter Hobb figured out that it was the phone that was making the damn racket, it had stopped ringing. He extended his arm towards Lauren's side of the bed (she had left for work a while earlier) and fumbled for the alarm clock. They had to keep it on Lauren's nightstand, since Hobb had an amazing knack for shutting the alarm off the instant it began to ring, causing both of them to be late on a number of occasions before Lauren finally insisted the clock be moved.

Hobb dragged the clock towards himself until the length of cord ran out. Groaning, he rolled towards it, peering at the red digital display. Who the hell had tried to call him at 9:37 in the morning? The phone rang again, prompting Hobb to hit the snooze button on the clock. Realizing what he was doing, he stretched for the receiver.

"Sleeping," he muttered into the phone.

"Not anymore," Jeff Townsend said.

Hobb considered allowing himself to nod off with the phone pressed to his ear, but opted instead to be reasonably polite since Townsend was, after all, a friend. "I don't like cheerful people before noon."

"So who's cheerful?"

Hobb yawned.

"How's the eye?"

Hobb opened both of them, the left one normally, the right just wide enough to reveal that the eyeball was still there. He was sporting a wicked eight-ball hemorrhage, the entire white of the eye an angry red, but he could still see. The swelling around the socket had diminished considerably, too. He was beginning to look and feel human again.

"The eye says hello."

"Back atcha."

"I'll put you on the phone with it, if you like. Then I can get some sleep while you two talk." Hobb was about as far from being a morning person as you could get; sustaining a conversation after awakening from a dead slumber took way too much effort.

"Tell it to meet me for breakfast," Townsend said. "I like the Cracker Barrel out on West Ardmore."

"That's a lot of work," Hobb muttered. Realizing he had drooled down his chin, he rubbed his face on Lauren's pillow.

"What if I were to say I'm buying?

"That's marginally more appealing."

"Are you and I having the same conversation?" Townsend asked.

"I don't know." Hobb flopped over in the bed and squinted at the ceiling. "What were we talking about?"

"Breakfast. Cracker Barrel. One half-hour," Townsend said, then hung up the phone.

Hobb strained to drop the receiver back into its cradle, then rolled over on his left side, curling into a ball and pulling the blankets over himself. He didn't remember the bed being so comfortable before. A guy could just drift right off in a bed that comfortable... Or he could get his ass in gear. Sighing, Hobb threw back the covers and forced himself to climb out of bed. Slipping into his jeans, he trudged off to the bathroom to make himself more presentable. His face *was* looking a lot better, especially since his right eye had stopped oozing pus. He thought that shit was never gonna end. The worst part was the first night back at home, when he woke up to find the cat licking the crud off his face.

He strained to open his right eye a little wider, then used his fingers to gingerly pry the eyelid open. The eight-ball hemorrhage was a little unnerving. Maybe he'd wear his sunglasses to breakfast, although it would be fun to creep Townsend out by staring at him with his battered eyeball.

Jeff Townsend was a good guy. He'd really gone to bat for Hobb once the shit had well and truly hit the fan. They'd both taken some serious heat for disappearing like they did, driving home on their own, but Townsend had smoothed that too. Didn't stop the assholes upstairs from insisting that Hobb "seriously consider" tendering his resignation—making it very clear that he could either resign and maintain a thin veneer of self-respect, or they'd kick his ass to the curb. Lauren had joked about him becoming a bank teller; hell, he'd be lucky if he could land a job shoveling dog shit at the pound, once this was all over and done with.

Hobb had been granted two weeks of unpaid leave to consider his limited options. That was five days ago. He was already going nuts sitting around the house like some kind of welfare case (although he had found that he was quite fond of *General Hospital*, thanks in large part to the presence of former *Playboy* Playmate Kelly Monaco), and the thought of being unemployed made him want to shoot himself in the head.

Hobb ran a hand over his stubbly beard. Lauren hated it—she'd been watching way too much *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or something

—but he thought it made him look kind of tough. Bank tellers didn't need to look tough. Shit. Hobb opened the medicine cabinet and reached for his razor and shaving gel.

***

Jeff Townsend chuckled as Hobb entered the lobby of the Cracker Barrel. "What, you couldn't leave well enough alone?"

A round Band-Aid was stuck to Hobb's left cheek just above the jaw line, where he'd cut himself whilst shaving. "I'm havin' a goddamn week, that's for sure," he said. "Just do me a favor and keep my fork away from my good eye."

The two men smiled and shook hands, then ignored the "Please wait to be seated" sign and found themselves a table. The staff all knew that Hobb and Townsend liked to sit in Sonia's section, and the formalities had long since fallen by the wayside. Out of habit, Townsend opened the menu. He always ordered the same meal: steak and eggs over-easy. He looked at Hobb. "How are you feelin'?"

"Okay," Hobb said. "Physically, anyway. You can guess how I feel otherwise."

Sonia, a plump Mexican woman in her thirties with a tiny black mole on her upper lip, approached the table. She was already scribbling on her order pad, but paused when she saw Hobb's face. "Honey, what did you do to make your wife so mad?"

"Flirted with a waitress." Hobb smiled.

Sonia grinned and went back to scribbling. "Do I even have to ask?" she asked.

Hobb and Townsend spoke at the same time. "Nope."

Sonia tutted, finished scribbling, and started to walk away.

"Hey, Sonia," Townsend called after her. She stopped, looking back expectantly.

"What if?"

The waitress held up her order pad. "Then you make me use two slips, 'cause I always write your ticket before your butts are even in the seats," she said. "Be back with your coffee." Grinning, she continued on her way.

"I wish she weren't married," Townsend whispered to Hobb.

"I'm tellin' ya. Mail-order bride," Hobb said, grinning.

"Who can afford the postage?" Townsend picked up his butter knife in his left hand and drummed it against his right index finger. "You figure out what you're going to do yet?"

"I'm not gonna be kicked out on my ass, so yeah, if that's what you're asking. I'm going to write the letter today."

Townsend tossed the knife aside and fixed Hobb with an earnest gaze. "What if you didn't have to resign?"

"Thennn... I get kicked out on my ass."

"No. What if you *didn't* resign. What if you *didn't have to*? Different scenario. What if you didn't have to face either option?"

"Then I would guess everyone else had died and you had assumed command of the Agency," Hobb said.

Townsend smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Well, it's not that good, but I can offer you a job."

Hobb studied him for a long moment. "I don't wanna joke about this," he said.

"No joke."

Hobb stared a little longer. His mouth went dry. For a long moment, he considered the possibility that he may still have been asleep in his ultra-comfortable bed. "How did you manage to arrange that?" he finally asked.

"I'm not quite sure myself," Townsend said, leaning forward again and resting his elbows on the table. "But I guess I suck a pretty mean cock."

Sonia chose that rather inopportune moment to arrive with the coffee pot, giving the big man a funny look as she poured. "Always with the bragging," she said with a smile.

As the waitress left, Townsend whispered to Hobb. "I think that may have shot the deal down in flames, even if she weren't married."

Hobb allowed himself to chuckle. If Townsend was offering something meaningful, maybe he'd still be able to live with himself. "So what's the job?"

Now it was the big man's turn to deliver a prolonged stare

"Don't tease me, now," Hobb prodded.

"I feel like a fucking moron even saying it out loud."

Townsend took a deep breath and let it out. "You've heard of Jason Voorhees? You know, the serial killer."

Okay, I guess that cinches it, Hobb thought. He was still asleep. "Jason Voorhees?"

Townsend's gaze flicked around the room, as if he were embarrassed. "Yeah."

"Big guy. Hockey mask. Has issues?"

"That would be the individual in question," Townsend continued, ignoring the joke. "I've been given the task of assembling a special purpose team. My first command."

Hobb tried to hide the pain he felt, but Townsend could see it in his eyes. Well, one eye.

"I don't feel right about it."

"No," Hobb replied. "You've got nothing to feel bad about. You deserve your own command."

Townsend shrugged his beefy shoulders. "Be that as it may."

"So what's the mission?" Hobb steered the subject back on track. "I mean, Jason Voorhees? I don't follow."

"Well, that's because it's bullshit, man." Townsend shook his head, frustrated. "The Agency... It's gotta be some kind of media-friendly thing they've cooked up, maybe even to make themselves look better after what happened to us. They're sending us into the field for a little search and destroy."

"Okay, but search where and destroy what?" Hobb asked.

Townsend sneered. "We are to enter the forest surrounding the infamous Camp Crystal Lake, where the strike team will hunt down and eliminate the threat of Jason Voorhees once and for all."

Hobb laughed. "So it's a snipe hunt."

"I can guarantee we will find a dozen snipes before we find a single Jason Voorhees. " Townsend studied his friend. "The important thing is, I convinced them that you should be a part of the team."

"Thanks."

Townsend snorted.

"Has anyone even sighted the son of a bitch in the last few years?" Hobb asked. "I hear more about Bigfoot than I do about Jason Voorhees."

"Ah ha!" Townsend said, point an accusing finger at Hobb. "So you do believe he exists."

"Given the mountain of dead teenagers left in his wake, I'd have to admit that, yes, I believe Jason Voorhees is out there somewhere," Hobb answered. "But do I believe we have a fucking snowball's chance in hell of finding the fucker?" He shook his head.

Sonia returned with their food, placing the plates in front of the two men. "Well, we'll certainly give it the old college try," Townsend said, tucking into his breakfast.

"I'm always glad to see men with ambition," the waitress said, smiling.

"You don't even know what we're talking about, Sonia," Townsend said.

"I try not to think about it," she replied, jauntily cocking her hip at Townsend as she walked away.

The two men ate in silence, chewing their food thoughtfully. Then Hobb spoke up. "Seriously. You've done a lot for me, Jeff." He smiled. "Snipe hunt or no."

"It's just—this whole business of being put in command—it's eating me up inside, Walt. I mean, I'm *your* right-hand man."

"So I'd be your second in command?"

The big man hesitated, then shook his head. "Standard-issue Operator is the best I could do."

Hobb felt the color drain out of his face. He'd worked so hard to get

that command. "When do we leave?" Hobb said, forcing a smile.

SIX

She was going to lose her husband.

Lauren realized she'd been trying to file the same paperback for the last fifteen minutes. She stared at the cover, finally registering *Hardcase* by Luke Short. Hell, she wasn't even in the western section. Lauren gripped the cart holding the books that needed shelving and pushed it along ahead of her, rounding the mystery section, and headed for westerns. The only thing she sold more of than western paperbacks were romance novels, and she had plenty of both that needed to be put on the racks. Got to keep the books moving, the money flowing.

The used bookstore had done surprisingly well, and Lauren loved running the place. She liked most of her customers, but she loved the smell of the old paperbacks and the cover art on the science fiction novels. Sometimes she got lost in her head while staring at those, too, but for entirely different reason. How could she talk him out of it? Was there anything she could say besides, "Please don't go. I don't want you to die," that would make Walter change his mind about this goddamn operation? God knew, she'd said that enough times. If it was ever going to work, it would've done so before now. It was the man's uncanny dedication and discipline—the same qualities that had drawn her to him in the first place—that were going to get him killed.

And just when she thought she was going to be able to keep him.

Lauren knew that the mess with the raid on the yuppie drug assholes had wrecked Walter inside, not to mention derailed his career. But she absolutely hated that fucking career. She could never tell him to his face, but she had been overjoyed when she learned that he was going to be driven out of the Agency, that his days as a human target were over. No more getting shot at in order to collect a paycheck. Sure, she had been joking about the bank teller thing, but she knew he could find something else to do, something that would give him a sense of satisfaction. And allow her to sleep at night.

Jason fucking Voorhees. Lauren wasn't sure if she believed the killer existed, but she knew one thing from all the stories: nobody sees Jason Voorhees and lives. Of course, Jason was known for killing horny, dope-smoking teenagers, and while Walter was most certainly the horniest man she had ever encountered, he was pretty far from fitting the bill otherwise. So maybe that would be a point in his favor when the machete started swinging.

Lauren leaned against the rack of wooden bookshelves. She felt sick to her stomach. There was no doubt about it, she adored Jeff Townsend, but why couldn't the big bastard have left well enough alone? If he really felt like he owed Walter so much, why couldn't he let

him have a decent, safe life with the woman who loved him?

Lauren was staring at the Luke Short novel again. "Oh my God," she whispered to herself, embarrassed. Scanning the shelves, she found a suitable spot for it. At the rate she was going, she'd have the cart shelved in about four days.

Lauren pulled another book from the cart. Luke Short again. How many books did the guy write? All those western authors seemed to have an incredible ability to crank out the words; assuming, of course, that the authors weren't a number of different writers and editors jostled together under a publishing house's pen name. She quickly shelved the book before she could become mesmerized by it.

A few years back she had almost lost Walter. He was just starting out with the Agency then. The Agency. Lauren sneered at the thought. Bunch of shady motherfuckers, so secretive they couldn't even give their particular branch of the government a real name. Sure, they might spend the biggest proportion of their time busting up drug labs, but there was a whole bunch of crap they were up to that was black as coal. Walter had been on any number of operations that he couldn't talk about, not even to his beloved wife.

It had been on one such operation when he'd almost been killed. To this day, she didn't know all the details, and, even under the circumstances, Walter refused to tell her what had really happened. All she knew was that something had gone seriously wrong with the operation and he'd been shot: two slugs in the chest and one in the stomach. The doctors had to cut most of his insides out of him and keep them in a bucket while they repaired the damage. He had actually died during the prolonged surgery, but only for a matter of seconds before they'd jump-started his heart. Walter was one big open wound for about a week until the surgeons put his guts back in and stitched him up. When he came around, she had asked him if he'd had any kind of out-of-body experience during the moments that he was dead, but he didn't remember anything and just wanted to make out with her. He was sporting a magnificent road map of scars on his torso as a reminder of the incident. Every time Lauren saw him with his shirt off, she thought about how close she had come to losing him.

Sighing, Lauren poked around at her cart of books. She had hoped that going about her usual tasks would help take her mind off things, but her heart just wasn't in it. If he had just lost his right eye when the yuppie hit him with the bat... Lauren felt cruel and selfish for even thinking of it. But she knew the Agency wouldn't let a one-eyed Operator go on a raid. She figured she could live with a partially blind Walter much better than she could live with no Walter at all. A one-eyed man could still find her in the dark, still hold her with the fierce love that she felt burn from within Walter every time he embraced her.

Jesus. She was starting to sound like one of those goddamn romance novels. Back to the westerns—at least she'd be perusing manlier material if she kept shelving. Another Luke Short book found its place on the rack.

A thought struck her. She ran a damn bookstore, for Pete's sake; maybe she had some kind of reference material, a little light reading for bedtime. Putting aside her shelving work, she walked to the true crime section and began scanning the shelves. There were books about Ed Gein, John Wayne Gacy, the Zodiac Killer, Albert Fish, the Son of Sam, Richard Ramirez, and numerous volumes on the Manson Family... But nothing on Jason Voorhees. Lauren checked the titles again. Maybe she had just missed it. Surely somebody out there had cashed in on the Camp Crystal Lake murders by writing a book about them. Again, she came up empty. She sank to the floor in front of the bookshelves and stared blankly at the spines of all the paperbacks. Then she started crying.

***

Kelly rolled onto her side, gathering the blankets around her. It was summer, for Christ's sake. How could it be so damn cold in this stupid cabin? She lay curled on the top bunk, staring across the room. The pale moonlight filtering through the windows did little to illuminate the interior of the cabin, and even if it had, there wasn't much to see. She was bunked with several other single women from the congregation, and what had at first sounded like a perpetual slumber party in the making had instead turned out to be Dullsville Extraordinaire.

These fine church-goin' chickies all liked to be in bed way too early for Kelly's taste, and even though she was forced to get up at the freaking asscrack of sun-up like everyone else or risk missing breakfast, her previous nocturnal lifestyle was hanging on for dear life and she was paying for it with lack of sleep. Lights out usually came around ten pm, and Kelly found herself tossing and turning in utter boredom until after two in the morning. And with all the work going on in the camp, she hardly ever managed to sneak off for a power nap during the day. The bags that had appeared under her eyes a couple days before were rapidly on their way to becoming cargo containers.

Kelly sighed deeply. When she was a kid, she had dreamed of going to summer camp. Even when she was watching movies like *Piranha*, with kids at camp being eaten alive by crazed fish, she always thought it looked like a great place to be. Just stay out of the fucking water, right? She had spent many an hour daydreaming about practicing her archery, climbing ropes, toasting marshmallows around the campfire at night... not to mention making out with the boys in a pleasant woodland environment. Now she just longed for her comfy chair and

some late-night television. Of course, those childhood dreams of campground shenanigans never centered around Camp Crystal Lake, that's for sure.

Instead of having a good time, she spent all day making sure she was close to other people, even if doing so made her appear to be completely nuts to those people—like the time she had forcibly dragged Susan Perkins into the bathroom with her so she wouldn't have to pee alone. And at night, she jumped at the slightest little sound—and the goddamn forest was absolutely full of things that made sounds, from sunset to sunrise. Squirrels, Kelly always told herself, but in reality she suspected that many of those things out there were much, much larger. She knew she had heard something big snuffling around the window closest to her bunk the other night, that's for sure. She was glad Denice Keenan had insisted on having the bottom bunk, claiming that her bad legs made it too difficult for her to climb the ladder. And how the hell does a woman in her late twenties have bad legs? Perhaps by piling all that Twinkie-produced weight on top of the unfortunate, spindly limbs? If some large woodland creature were to chew its way into the cabin, maybe it would eat Denice first and give Kelly time to escape. Lord knew the chubby gimp would provide a heartier meal than Kelly.

Kelly flopped over on her back and stared at the ceiling. She was doing it again. Being horrible, Denice—like everybody else in the congregation—was friendly to the point of being suffocating, and here she was making fun of the poor woman's weight problem. Maybe it was an out-of-control gland or virus, and not an overindulgence in tasty treats. Or maybe she was just fucking fat and needed to lay off the chocolates. Climb some goddamn ropes and run some wind sprints. Kelly cupped her face in her hands and yawned. If she could just shut her brain off for a while, maybe she could get some sleep and she wouldn't be so cranky and lie around thinking terrible things about fat ladies.

She needed to face the truth—she had probably made a big mistake in coming here. Father Long might be sexy as hell (maybe he was even sporting a seventeen-inch dong), but he had been doing everything short of blatantly avoiding Kelly since the day the congregation rolled into camp. And living with church people, with the possible exception of Meredith, was flat-out boring. At least they had yet to sit around the campfire singing "Khumbaya," but life at the camp was definitely a non-stop carnival of monotony. Hell, even Meredith had been acting a little weird lately. Kind of subdued, like she wasn't feeling well. Maybe she was on her period. Whatever it was, the girl wasn't willing to talk about it.

A thought occurred to Kelly. Had Jason killed anyone in this cabin, maybe even in the very bunk she lay in? He had murdered like, eight

thousand people or thereabouts, right? Surely at least one of 'em had been slaughtered in this room? She slithered towards the edge of the bed and peered off into the hazy moonlight, looking for telltale stains of dried blood on the wood floor.

Wait a minute. Where was the body? If it had really been Jason on that cross back in the old strip mall church, Father Long had to have the corpse tucked away somewhere. Unless, of course, it hadn't been Jason at all. Kelly wracked her memory of that night—was Don James there? She had been so intent on the sight of Jason Voorhees strapped to the cross (and who wouldn't have been?), she couldn't recall much else from that night. She was pretty sure Don hadn't been around, though. Which meant he could've been stuffed into the Jason costume. She'd never seen Don James and Superman in the same room, after all.

Dangling her head over the side of her bunk, Kelly listened to Denice's strained, fat-girl breathing. I'm sorry Denice, she thought. You've got a bitch for a roommate. But oh my, you are indeed fat.

Something thunked against the wall near the cabin's door. Kelly jumped sharply, gasping. Holding her breath, she listened intently. The seconds dragged by. Then an odd *tick-tick-scraaaaape* emanated from the base of the door. Claws, perhaps? Something with claws trying to find a way in? Or a machete blade being dragged across the surface of the door?

No. Not a machete blade. Not a machete blade at all. Was the door locked? And why didn't Fatso in the bunk below hers wake the fuck up so she wouldn't be facing this threat by herself? Another thump. This time, Kelly saw the door shudder in its frame. Straining not to make a sound, Kelly slowly worked her way backwards until she was pressed against the wall, the covers pulled up to her chin. She stared at the door.

A half-hour later, she was still staring. Whatever, or whoever, was out there had apparently wandered off. The only sound in the dark cabin was Denice Keenan's labored breathing. Kelly needed to pee so badly her insides ached, but there was no way she was leaving that bunk, even if she could convince somebody to go with her.

"I wanna go home," Kelly whispered very softly.

***

Three large crows pecked viciously at the road kill splattered across the centerline of the two-lane highway. One of the well-fed birds violently punched its sharp beak deep into the carcass, coming up with a stringy length of heat-bloated intestine. Immediately, the other birds launched themselves at the gory prize, but the lucky crow took wing, flapping away with the gooey bit of the viscera trailing behind it. Undaunted, the two remaining birds returned to their feast, cawing

raucously as they ripped at the dead animal's flesh.

Then the Stryker M1126 light armored vehicle rolled into view, sending the crows fluttering skywards in a squawking panic. The road-kill carcass was torn to shreds beneath the eight massive tires humming along the pavement, bits of rendered meat spattering against the half-inch-thick steel body of the vehicle. If the rapidly departing crows had been interested, they would have seen two more LAVs cruising along behind the first. The flat-black, unmarked infantry carriers were traveling at just under their maximum speed, about sixty miles per hour. Their ceramic-skin armor shielding was capable of shrugging off 14.5mm armor-piercing rounds, and unless one Mr Jason Voorhees had recently begun purchasing black-market weaponry, it was unlikely they'd face much more than a machete or a pitchfork.

Wedged into the narrow driver's seat of the lead vehicle, strike team Operator Benjamin Hurley let out a loud *whoop*. "I think we just drew first blood!"

Back in the crew compartment, Operator Samantha "Dog Day After" Noon leaned out to yell at the driver. "Aw shit, Hurley—you didn't hit another kid, did ya? I don't wanna have to pick another pair of sneakers out of the grill."

"Yeah, I hear you prefer picking pubic hair out of your teeth," Hurley replied.

Samantha Noon viciously snapped her teeth at him, but Hurley's eyes were on the road. At twenty years old, Noon was the youngest member of the strike team. Her chiseled beauty, stylishly close-cropped black hair and icy blue eyes belied the woman's demeanor. She was fresh out of boot camp and had earned her spot on the team by being notorious for kicking asses with little provocation, but disciplined enough to save it for off-duty hours. Noon had been banned from seven bars in her home town, meaning she only had two choices left when it came to drinking (and fortunately for her, one of those last two watering holes was owned by her father). If Charles Bronson were an especially sexy woman, he would have been Samantha Noon.

Another six members of the strike team were seated with Noon in the crew compartment, on the barely-padded benches running along either side. All the Operators were clad in black fatigues and bulletproof vests, sporting numerous pockets for equipment and ammo. For comfort's sake, their Kevlar helmets were gripped between their feet, and their black gloves dangled from their belts.

Jeff Townsend sat at the back of the vehicle, just inside the main hatch, his head lolling from side to side. He was sound asleep. Noon watched her commanding officer for a moment, smiling. "Look at that shit," she said, pointing at the drool running down Townsend's chin and onto his armor vest.

"Ain't he cute?" Operator Bruno Ortega purred. Ortega was exactly what one might expect from a guy named Bruno: thick and brawny with a face like a bulldog. "Maybe he'll wet his pants, too."

"Then he can have Hobb change his fucking diaper," Noon snarled.

A burst of salty laughter rang out in the LAV. Townsend, lost in his dreams, was oblivious to the rude comments.

In the second LAV, Walter Hobb wasn't feeling quite as relaxed as his friend, although he would have given anything to be sleeping through this. From the moment the strike team was assembled, Hobb had been the kid nobody wanted to sit with in the cafeteria. He couldn't blame the others, really; after all, he'd been responsible for two of his men being slaughtered in the raid on the yuppie meth lab, wasn't he? His furiously red eight-ball hemorrhage didn't seem to add to his charisma, either. He found that most people, if they could bring themselves to look him in the eye at all, immediately suffered a severe case of watery eyes. Not only was he a pariah, he was a freaky looking one.

Some of the team members were a little more open with their disdain for Hobb than others; in particular Townsend's second in command, Chris Seaver. The Element Leader took every opportunity to pick at Hobb's scabs. Townsend had already had to dress Seaver down more than once, before they'd even left the base. Hobb expected it would only get worse once they were in the field; he was thankful that Seaver was driving the third LAV, instead of being cooped up with him. It was easier to ride with eight people who hated him, but kept their thoughts to themselves, than with one loudmouth carrying a hubcap-sized chip on his shoulder.

And then there was the little matter of Lauren wanting to kill him (or at least divorce him). As it turned out, she was relatively serious about that "bank teller" crack and nearly went through the roof when he told her about Townsend's offer. She'd become used to the idea that her husband would resign from the Agency and spend his days doing some kind of pleasant office work in an environment where nobody opened up on him with automatic weapons. They hadn't fought so hard in years—only this time, they didn't kiss and make up. Lauren had cried again the morning he left. Walking out the door of their house, and shutting it behind him, was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. He figured it was going to take a hell of a lot to smooth things over with her this time.

Hobb felt like his guts were dragging in the dirt But at least he was going to spend some time in the woods, hunting for an unstoppable mass murderer, so the picture wasn't entirely bleak.

SEVEN

Mark Brody was the first member of the congregation to hear the vehicles approaching. He was by himself in the field they'd chosen for the garden, clearing ground cover to make way for planting, when he heard the increasing growl of powerful engines. The racket annoyed Brody. Working out here, where the only sound was provided by the birds flitting through the trees, was his favorite activity.

Standing, he slipped his heavy work gloves off and slapped them against his pants leg, beating the dust out of them. He cocked his head from side to side, wondering if he could see the highway from where he stood. Too many trees for that, thank the Lord. He'd had enough of cars and traffic. Now he just wanted peace and quiet and his hands in the soil. Until the judgment came down, anyway. He still didn't feel too confident about his ability to pass, despite Father Long's reassurances. That was another reason he liked working in the garden, by himself—it took his mind off his constant nagging self-doubt, not to mention the question of when. When would the Vessel return to reap the harvest of unclean souls?

The entire congregation was filled with a sense of foreboding. You could feel it radiating from them, even if no one discussed it openly. The dull apprehension hanging in the air reminded Brody of the miserable months he had spent living in Los Angeles, where everybody seemed to be struggling under the oppressive burden of waiting for the earthquake that would finally shake the city off into the sea. He credited a lot of LA's debauchery to that particular phenomenon; when people feel like their lives could end at any moment, and in spectacular fashion, it only makes sense that they lose themselves in drugs and sex and Lord only knew what other wanton behavior. He had heard whisperings of a cult that routinely dined on human flesh, capturing runaways and other unfortunates to be used as sacrifices. It was a credit to Father Long's teachings that his followers went about their daily lives without complaint.

Brody frowned. What was making all that noise? Some sort of construction equipment heading out to clear up the remains of the failed housing development? No. The engines were getting louder and the main highway curved away from the field he was in. Whatever was coming, it was headed for Camp Crystal Lake. Curious, Brody started off across the field, towards the dirt road that led to the campground. He caught glimpses of them through the trees before he reached the road: wedge-shaped military vehicles of some kind. Three of them. The army? What on earth would the army want here, of all places?

Breaking into a run, Brody burst from the tree line just as the armored vehicles rumbled past. He tripped, falling to his knees near

the road's edge, gazing up at the massive transports with an open-mouthed stare. The engines were so loud at this range that they rattled Brody's ability to even think straight

As the LAVs passed, he shuffled backwards and got to his feet, still staring at the passing vehicles. Whatever this was about, it couldn't be good for the Ministry. Brody took off running, hoping he could somehow reach the campground before the tanks—or whatever they were—did.

***

Kelly and Meredith had almost walked to the opposite side of the lake from the campground when they heard the LAVs roll in. She was supposed to be helping out in the kitchen, but when Meredith had come to her with an incredibly sad look on her face saying she needed to talk, Kelly figured whatever she might have to offer in the way of kitchen aid could take a flying leap. She was grateful for the opportunity to get away from everyone else anyway. It seemed like every damn member of the church always managed to see the bright side of everything, and Kelly had reached the point where she would have paid twenty bucks just to hear someone bitch a little, or pick holes. Or at least commiserate with her, instead of telling her that her skin looked healthier without makeup or that there's too much violence on television or that donuts make you fat. Shit, that was what she wanted: to smear her face with thick goth-girl eyeliner, watch *CSI*, and eat an entire fucking box of Krispy Kremes. Then call her friend and spend a couple hours talking about how men suck, but they sure would like to get into the pants of that new bartender at Burt's Tiki Lounge. If she heard the sweet-natured chirping of one more cheerful person, Kelly thought she might gouge her own heart out with a sharpened stick.

Which is what had made talking to Meredith so cool, at least until Kelly realized that the girl was dealing with some seriously fucked-up shit. They had started out talking about random stuff, day-to-day junk that they both missed (like not having to walk around in the woods at night to go pee or the easy availability of *MTV*), but as they got farther away from the campground and potential prying eyes, Meredith had begun to open up. And what she was saying was giving Kelly the serious creeps.

Talking so fast that she stumbled over her own words, the girl had told Kelly about the weird shit Curtis Rickles had said and done on the drive out. Real sneaky Bad Touch Uncle kind of stuff. Things that made Kelly want to cut the guy's balls off with a blunt kitchen knife, ex-Marine or not. From the way Meredith told it, it was obvious Rickles was an old hand at plying naive teenage girls (Meredith was fucking

seventeen, for Christ's sake) with sly wordplay, confusing them so they'd think they were the ones being bad. And it hadn't ended on the drive; Rickles had kept it up since then, always being devious about it but pushing a little harder every time. Like showing up at the cabin Meredith and her parents were bunked in when she was alone. That shit doesn't happen unless somebody's paying close attention to the girl's movements—there were four families sharing that cabin, it had to be a miracle for anyone to ever be alone in there.

And, while alone in the cabin with Meredith and helping her make her bed (like that didn't set off the pervo alarms all by itself), Rickles had leaned in and huffed the sheets, telling Meredith the bed smelled pretty, just like she did. "I'll bet this bed's nice and cozy," the creepy son of a bitch had said, running his fingers over it like he was petting a dog. He had found a need to work on the plumbing in the bathroom while Meredith was taking a shower, too. The list of atrocities went on and on, something disturbing happening every day since they'd arrived at Camp Crystal Lake.

"Did you tell Father Long?" Kelly had asked the girl.

"Yeah, but..." Meredith hesitated.

"But what?"

Meredith looked guiltily at Kelly. "I know you like him, but... it was weird."

Kelly felt her heart sink. "Weird how?" she asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"He started talking about babies and stuff."

"I... what?"

"Like, how he has this vision of the future, with lots of children and families and... it was just weird."

Kelly nibbled worriedly at her lower lip. She didn't hear it herself, maybe Meredith misunderstood what Father Long was saying.

"I think he wants me to marry Mr Rickles," Meredith said. "Have babies with him."

Kelly stared blankly at the girl. "Marry him?"

"It's kind of gross," Meredith added.

No fucking shit, Kelly wanted to say. "Do you remember his exact words? Did he say anything else?"

"Yeah." Meredith thought about it for a moment, trying to recall. "I mean, not his exact words, but I kind of felt like he wanted me to be some kind of a reward for Mr Rickles or something."

For services rendered. Just leave the teenage girl on the dresser. "So he was, like, encouraging you to, to..." Kelly struggled with her words. "...be nice to Rickles?"

"Yeah, kind of. Like I said, it was weird." Meredith stared at Kelly for a few moments, doe-eyed and dreamy. "I like *you*, Kelly."

"I know. I like you too," Kelly said, missing the girl's point. "But I need you to answer me. Do you think Long wants you to... to sleep with Rickles?" She was already trying to figure out how to get to a phone, call somebody who could come get her and Meredith, take them away from the camp. She had to get the girl out of there before Rickles could collect his little "reward" in full.

Smiling shyly, Meredith reached out and pressed her fingertip against Kelly's left breast, holding it there. "Plork," she whispered. Kelly stared down at the finger jabbing her in the tit for what seemed like a very long time indeed. What was going on around here? She looked at Meredith again, unable to make her lips and tongue work out of sheer stunned bewilderment. It was like the entire goddamned world had gone completely insane.

"I know it's wrong," Meredith said, her words trembling with naughty excitement. "But I like you."

This was nuts. How the hell had Kelly suddenly become the old pervert? How had she gone from Older Sister to Object of Lesbian Desire without even having a clue as to what was occurring?

"You're touching my boob," Kelly said stupidly.

Somehow, Meredith read that as an open invitation. Instead of removing the offending digit, she cupped the underside of Kelly's breast in her fingers and actually lifted it, as if testing the weight.

"No, I mean, don't," Kelly said, grabbing Meredith's wrist and pushing her hand away.

The girl looked stricken. She awkwardly backed away from Kelly, her lip quivering as if she might cry. "I know it's a sin," she said. "A terrible, terrible sin. I tried, really I did. But it's like this thing inside me."

"No, it's okay." Kelly stepped toward Meredith.

"I thought you liked me."

"I *do*, it's just..." What the hell should she say to the girl? You're a hot little number, honey, but I gots to have the cock? Or perhaps, come see me on your eighteenth birthday, and if I get drunk enough maybe we'll lube the ole labia then? No, neither of those really suited the occasion. "I could go to jail," Kelly thoughtlessly blurted.

Meredith's eyes lit up.

Way to go, Kelly admonished herself. Dig that hole a little deeper.

"No one would find out," Meredith promised.

Hoo boy. "That wouldn't make it right," Kelly said. "Any more than what's happening with Rickles is right."

Meredith sneered at the mention of the creepy old man. "But it's different. I... You know. I really like you."

And that, fortunately for Kelly, was when those big black tanks arrived on the scene.

***

A bunch of goddamned campers! Hobb couldn't believe his eyes as he piled out the back hatch of the LAV he rode in. How the hell had this happened? These people weren't supposed to be here.

Of course, the campers probably thought the same thing, seeing twenty black-clad men and women leaping from the enormous armored vehicles, slapping helmets on and driving ammo cassettes into their intimidating weaponry. It was a terrifying sight until Ortega slipped in a patch of mud and landed on his ass. Samantha Noon was the only person with balls enough to laugh at the man, though.

The Agency was becoming rather adept at withholding intelligence, Hobb reflected. Or failing to gather any, as the case may be. He wondered who they had sitting in that dark room, staring into computer screens, and apparently forgetting to jot down reasonably important bits of information, like the fact that the supposedly-empty campground the strike team was sent to infiltrate was occupied.

Some of the Operators took up defensive positions, while others merely stood around, staring at the unexpected residents of the campground. Hobb was one of those who just stared, although he put forth a great deal of internal effort in cursing his bad luck. Surely this situation would somehow find a way to wind up being yet another dick in his ass. He glanced back to see Chris Seaver, his head jutting up out of the third LAV's front hatch, giving him a look that would have freeze-dried a dog turd. The guy definitely did not like him.

A lanky guy who had "Leader of the Pack" written all over him took a few hesitant steps towards the strike team. Hobb watched as Jeff Townsend approached the man, shoving his helmet onto his head and slinging his rifle.

"Uh... can I help you folks?" the Lanky Guy asked, holding his hands up slightly and flashing a nervous smile.

Charismatic though the grin may have been, Townsend was unmoved. "What are you doing here? Are you people authorized to be here?" Townsend's eyes quickly traveled across the two-dozen or so potential targets timidly gathering on the scene, ticking off their exact number in his head. Twenty-three, including the ostensible leader.

Hobb caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Six operators, including Noon and Ortega, were taking up fire—and-flank positions. Covering the people they could see and preparing for any they couldn't.

"Are you?" Lanky Guy asked.

Hobb winced. Bad move, Lanky Guy. Be nice to the giant with the belt-fed machine gun. *And* his friends.

"I can assure you that we are, sir," Townsend replied in a clipped, military tone.

Lanky Guy proffered his hand. "I'm Father Eric Long," he said, voice as smooth as glass. "I own the lease on this property."

Now how the flaming fuck had that slipped by without anyone noticing? Hobb wondered. Somebody buys the lease on Camp Crystal Lake and the Agency doesn't know about it? Shit like that should be in the papers, on the evening news, and it sure as hell ought to be screaming across the computer monitors all the high-paid Agency intel guys were gazing into.

Townsend ignored Long's outstretched hand. Withdrawing it, Long looked at the Operators spread out around him, their weapons at the ready. "Your men..." he paused, squinting and sizing up Samantha Noon, "...and women... can put away their guns. We're all pretty harmless here, just peaceable churchgoing folk." He brought out that pleasant smile again.

"Church?" Townsend asked, confused.

"The Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel," Long said. "Didn't you see the sign on your way in?"

"Must've missed it."

At the sound of running footsteps on the road behind them, several of the Operators whirled, leveling their guns on the terrified figure of Mark Brody. He froze in his tracks, his hands flying upwards as he stared wide-eyed in fear at the firepower that was trained in his direction. Tension was thick in the air.

"It's okay!" Father Long yelled. "He's with us!"

"Yeah, we figured that out, dipshit," Samantha Noon muttered.

As tensions eased and guns were lowered, Long waved Brody forward. "Come on, Mark. It's all right."

Brody gave a questioning look to the nearest Operator, who glanced at Townsend for the okay. Townsend nodded and the Operator passed it on to Brody, who uneasily walked the gauntlet of armed men and women to join the other members of the congregation.

By now, a handful of other people were appearing from within the cabins, drawn by the hubbub outside. Hobb counted thirty-three, with only a couple that concerned him: the crusty-looking dude with missing teeth who was keeping to the shadows in the main building's doorway, and the excon or ex-biker (he had the tattoos for either option) who had taken up a position close behind Long, his weightlifter's arms folded across his chest to display the artistically-enhanced muscles. Everyone else looked pretty harmless, although some had a crazy look in their eyes. Anybody who'd go to church at Camp Crystal Lake needed to be a little crazy, Hobb guessed.

Townsend addressed Long. "I'm going to need to see that lease, sir."

"Not a problem. Not a problem at all." He turned to speak to Mr Tattoos. "Don, would you go to my office and bring me the paperwork

for the lease? It's in the middle desk drawer. I believe it's unlocked."

Don nodded and started off towards the main building. Hobb thought they should send a couple men inside with the guy to make sure nothing untoward went on while he was out of sight, and was pleased to see that he and Townsend shared a brain. Townsend signaled to two of the Operators who hustled to catch up with Mr Tattoos and accompany him on his way.

"Can you explain what this is all about?" Long asked Townsend. "I mean, armed soldiers rolling up here in tanks? I know there are folks in town who weren't too happy when we moved in out here, but this all," he made a sweeping gesture with his arm, taking in the Operators and the LAVS, "seems a bit extreme. Has there been some kind of complaint about us?"

As Long spoke, Hobb thought he caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a pair of sexy girls moving through the trees down near the lake, heading towards the gathering.

"No sir, no complaints at all," Townsend told Long. "In fact, I'll be honest with you. You people are as big a surprise to us as we are to you. We had no idea anybody was in residence out here."

Hobb continued to watch the tree line. Yup, there they were again. As the two girls got closer, Hobb realized that one of them was probably about fifteen years-old, but the other was definitely of legal age, and she was more than acceptable material for one's viewing pleasure. If he wasn't a happily married man, of course. Assuming he could still make that claim. Hobb wondered how Lauren was doing, if her anger towards him had softened any in the hours since he'd left home.

The girls (okay, girl and woman) hurried over to join the other members of the congregation. They were out of breath and looked about as scared as was to be expected, under the circumstances. There was something about the older one, though; she almost looked happy to see the strike team.

"What's going on?" the younger girl asked, taking the arm of an old man—her dad, no doubt, although the old duffer had obviously gone to work a little late when it came to fathering the kid.

Long smiled reassuringly at the girl. "That's what we're trying to figure out, Meredith. Everything's okay, though. These gentlemen mean us no harm."

From her vantage point, Noon sneered. "Not yet, anyway," Hobb heard her say. He looked back and shot a tiny smile at the woman. She didn't return it. Hobb was still looking in Noon's direction when he saw her trigger finger tense up. Turning back, he saw that Don had reappeared from the main building, gripping a stack of papers in one hand. The Operators accompanying him dogged his heels. Everyone

waited quietly as Don delivered the lease to Father Long, who handed it over to Townsend.

"See?" Long said, pointing at the paper. "It's all right there in black and white."

Townsend flipped through the lease, pausing to read over parts of it. "Well I'll be damned," he muttered.

"I hope not," Long said, smiling,

A tiny grin flickered across Townsend's face. "Yes sir." He handed the lease back to Long. "Guess we can't argue with your paperwork, Father, but be that as it may, I'm still going to have to ask you and your congregation to pack up and leave for a short time."

"And I'm going to have to ask why."

"I'm afraid I can't get into the specifics of it, sir, but I can tell you that you may not be safe here."

Hobb was eyeing the woman who had walked out of the woods. She was positively vibrating, like a kid who was trying not to piss her pants.

"Well," Father Long said, pausing to consider his words, "even if that truly were the case, and I must say I don't agree with you, we've got nowhere else to go."

"There's a motel in town," Townsend suggested. "I'm sure they'd have enough rooms for all of you."

"And would they allow us to stay there out of the goodness of their hearts? We don't have money for motel rooms."

Don't let this get ugly, Jeff, Hobb thought.

Townsend spoke softly but sternly. "I could order you to leave, sir."

"You could try." Long smiled.

Oh boy. It's gonna get ugly. Hobb sighed, then glanced at Mr Tattoos and Crusty Toothless Guy. Both of them had tensed up, anticipating trouble. At this point, there wasn't much to worry about unless Long had a bunch of men hidden somewhere with sniper rifles at the ready. The congregation was facing off with almost two-dozen heavily armed and well-trained strike team Operators, surely they had the sense not to do anything stupid?

Townsend broke the uncomfortable silence. "Then the responsibility for your people's safety rests on your shoulders."

"No," Long corrected him. "Their safety rests in the hands of God."

For several moments, the two men stared each other down like a couple of gunslingers in an Italian western. "For your sake, I certainly hope so," Townsend said. Then he spun on his heels and signaled his team. "Wrap it up and move it out!"

As the others jumped to follow the order, Hobb took one last look at the nervous woman. For an instant, he thought she was going to run after the strike team. Yes sir, it was safe to say that something here was not right.

EIGHT

So let's take stock, Kelly thought, as she watched the honkin' big military vehicles roll away down the dirt road. Creepy perverts who wanna get it on with—if not marry—seventeen year-old girls; check. Underage lesbian lust; check. Attractive and charming, but perhaps unbalanced, preacher; check. And now a platoon of soldiers trying to run us all off the property; check. Oh, and of course, the maggot-ridden corpse of Jason Voorhees hanging on a cross—can't leave that one out. Good times indeed. And she may have just blown the one chance to get herself and Meredith out of there. Why didn't she speak up? Just run over to the soldier who kept looking at her and tell him what was going on? Because she was scared, that's why. At least she could finally admit that much to herself. She was scared of Curtis Rickles for sure, and as much as she hated to think it, she was scared of Father Long. Now that she was being honest with herself, she could see that the preacher had been a little on the spooky side from the start.

If she took off running full-tilt boogie, maybe she could catch the soldiers before they reached the road. Or maybe Rickles would catch her first But what would he do? Surely Long wouldn't let anyone hurt her, or make anyone stay if they didn't want to.

Surely.

Hell, even Jim Jones let a handful of his followers leave Jonestown. Afterwards, of course, he sent a bunch of men with guns to kill them all as they boarded the planes on that airstrip in Guyana, but let's not split hairs.

Kelly wondered if Long had a big batch of cyanide Kool-Aid set aside. What would it take to make him pass around the Dixie cups? She eyed the father suspiciously. Long was obviously agitated by the arrival of the soldiers; Kelly thought it was the first time she had seen him sweat, and he was doing that prodigiously. The sides of his shirt were soaked almost to his waist and she could see droplets standing out on his forehead. As if sensing her eyes on him, Long turned to stare at Kelly, his face twisted with smoldering intensity Startled by the man's expression, she tried to force a little smile, but he merely turned away to face his followers. That bizarre look still gripped his a features, pulling them into a mask of...

Of madness, Kelly thought.

His voice taut and controlled, Long addressed the congregation. "I want everyone to put aside work for the rest of the day. I want you all to go to your cabins and pray. Make your peace with the Lord." His fervent gaze traveled across the worried faces of his followers. "Trouble has found its way to our little ministry." The preacher turned, staring off down the road. The sound of the armored vehicles could still be

heard, dwindling in the distance. Long took a deep breath, finally smiling again. "The Hand of Judgment will be resurrected tonight."

Everything in Kelly's body screamed at her to run, but she just couldn't do it.

***

Curtis Rickles could feel the intense hatred rising within him as he had watched the armored troop transports roll away. He hated anything to do with the military, for one thing, but he particularly hated these bastards, because he had a very bad feeling they had just thrown an exceptionally large monkey wrench into his plans. And if Father Long was ready to resurrect the Vessel, then he felt the same way.

Who the hell were these assholes, anyway? Rickles had carefully scoped out their uniforms looking for insignia, but they weren't sporting any that he could see. Decked out in black as they were, they could have been a SWAT team, but if that were the case they would have been labeled as such. No, these guys were something else entirely. Black ops of some kind. But what did they want with the ministry? If it was about the guns the congregation kept locked away, it would've been a matter for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. You don't send out a team like that unless there's some serious shit going down, and Rickles didn't have a clue what that might—

Wait a minute.

Jason Voorhees.

These guys were here to track down Jason Voorhees, the mass-murderer of Camp Crystal Lake. If he was right, then it seemed obvious the strike team—whoever the hell had sent them—were not aware that Father Long and the Ministry were in possession of the body. They never would have rolled out of the campground like they did if they had any idea they were practically on top of their mission objective. A smile spread across Rickles's face. This was a very interesting situation indeed.

***

It was after nightfall by the time the strike team had set up their base camp. Leaving Camp Crystal Lake, they had driven a little further down the road until they came to the turn-off for the housing development that had succumbed to the realty-sales-crushing power of Jason Voorhees This put the team on the far side of the lake from the campground, their tents shadowed by a semicircle of abandoned two-story faux log cabins, frozen in various stages of construction. Many of the cabins had been vandalized, adding to the postapocalyptic atmosphere. The place, to put it mildly, was creepy.

Well-fed with MREs, the twenty members of the strike team were

busily engaged in various activities, not the least of which was cleaning and prepping their weaponry. Hobb strolled past the assortment of superior firepower the team had brought along. Ten FN MK46 belt-fed machineguns with both ammo cassettes *and* the glorious two-hundred-round belt rail interface (the things barked out 5.56 caliber rounds fast enough to tear a man apart before the first chunks hit the ground); five MGL Mk-1 Multiple Grenade Launchers (real nasty things, capable of spitting out six 40mm grenades in three seconds, each grenade dispersing enough high-explosive-driven ball-bearings to tear a human to pieces); five shotguns equipped with both breaching rounds and double-ought buck; a heaping handful of Claymore mines; an assortment of frag and red phosphorous grenades; and, of course, everybody carried their HK M23 pistol tricked out with laser-aiming module slung under the barrel. Gun porn. He loved it. *Jason Voorhees, unstoppable killer. Meet the motherfuckers who are going to stop you.*

Assuming, that is, if they could find the hockey mask-wearing freak. The current whereabouts of their quarry had been the subject of much discussion over dinner, and the talk was still raging.

"I say we send Noon out as bait," Ortega suggested. "Put her in a bikini or maybe have her make out with someone." The burly Operator threw Chris Seaver a pointed look. "Everybody knows Jason likes titties."

"You got some mighty fine bitch-tits on you, Ortega," Seaver said. "Maybe you oughta go topless, shake those babies around for a while. Then we'll see who comes outta the woods."

Noon let out a coarse laugh and knocked fists with Seaver. Most of the team knew they were knocking far more than that, but everybody kept quiet about it. Seaver had rank on Noon and if word got out they were banging each other, it'd mean big trouble for the both of them. Hobb thought that might be the reason Seaver didn't stir the fudge a little more vigorously where he was concerned—the guy was afraid Hobb would squeal. Not much chance of that. Hobb might punch Seaver's fucking lights out, but as long as their extracurricular activities didn't endanger the mission, he wasn't about to tell tales out of school. Hobb had kept to himself for the most part since they'd arrived, and figured he'd stay the course for the time being. It was pretty clear that the others didn't have a lot of love for him, and subjecting himself to their disdain wasn't at the top of his list of things to do. He'd be there when he needed to be.

Hobb paused to peer into the back of Seaver's LAV. Besides hauling all the camping gear, the vehicle held another, unusual payload: the crew/cargo area was nearly full of heavy metal lock-boxes, each one about two foot by two foot.

Jeff Townsend stepped into view a few yards away from Hobb. The

two men exchanged a nod. Jeff hadn't exactly been friendly so far, but with good reason: knowing their history, if the other members of the team saw Townsend and Hobb being all palsy-walsy, they'd think their commanding officer was coddling the fuck-up. Same reason you didn't want the teacher making a fuss over you if you were the kid who got picked on in school. It only made things worse.

To be fair, there were a couple members of the team (Stilton and Blair, specifically) who treated Hobb okay. They had approached Hobb after dinner and told him they thought the whole yuppie bloodbath was the Agency's cross to bear, and that Hobb had been handed the shit end of the stick. Fucking news flash, right? But at least that gave him two more in his corner.

"Hey, Captain!" Seaver shouted.

Hobb and Townsend turned at the same time, then Hobb remembered his position on the food chain. Townsend shot him a rueful grin.

"Why didn't we just run those Jesus freaks out of there?" Seaver flashed a sneering smile at his fellows. "We could be doing this shit in log cabin comfort tonight." \

A couple of "Fuck yeahs" rose from the team.

"Because those Jesus freaks have a lease," Townsend said. "Which gives them a legal right to the property, which means if we were to run them off we make ourselves and the Agency look real bad to the folks at home who see the weeping church folk on their evening news. Besides, Townsend added, "I didn't realize you were such a pussy, Seaver. Gotta have a comfy bed so you can get those good eight hours, huh?"

A chorus of taunts rose from the team. As his fellow Operators gave Seaver a hard time over Townsend's good-natured affront, he snatched up an FN MK46 and slammed the ammo cassette home.

"Yeah, it's gonna be 'pussy this' when me and my belt-fed wife-tamer meet up with Jason Voorhees, motherfuckers," Seaver hissed.

That was all it took to turn the whole place into feeding time at the monkey pen: enthusiastic hoots and hollers filled the air as the combat-hungry Operators waved clenched fists over their heads and stomped their boots in the dirt. It was positively tribal. Turning away from the boisterous scene, Hobb stared out across the surface of the water. The lights were burning brightly at Camp Crystal Lake. He wondered what that nervous young woman was doing right about now.

***

In Camp Crystal Lake's former cafeteria and current house of worship, Kelly Mills was practically shitting in her pants out of sheer, unadulterated fear. The entire congregation was gathered there, everyone seated on cold, uncomfortable metal folding chairs—the same

ones that tended to put Kelly's ass cheeks to sleep, and the effect was no different tonight, merely adding to her discomfort. Father Long paced at the head of the room, the sweating that had begun when the soldiers first appeared only increasing as the day wore on. The man's normally tousled locks were slicked to his head and his button-down shirt clung to his wiry frame as he prowled the room. He looked, Kelly thought, like a junkie jonesing for a fix.

She didn't know if everybody else was as scared as she was, but nobody was looking very cheerful. Meredith, whether out of anger or embarrassment after their encounter in the woods, had avoided Kelly all day. The girl was seated with her parents and looked as if she'd spent the last few hours crying, her eyes rubbed red and raw. Why hadn't she run? Why hadn't she run and made the soldiers come back, Kelly admonished herself. She might have been able to prevent whatever the hell was about to happen.

When the soldiers had left and Long had sent the flock away to their cabins to pray, the other girls who bunked with her—fat ole Denice Keenan, Lorelei Picardi, Jennifer Crenshaw and that cranky, vinegar-smelling spinster Charlotte Rutherford—had wanted Kelly to sit with them on the floor, huddled into a sniffling little circle and praying their little hearts out to Father, Son and Holy Ghost so they wouldn't be judged too harshly when the moment came. And okay, so maybe it wasn't very neighborly of Kelly to tell the raggedy ass bitches to fuck the hell off, but she had done it and she wasn't proud of herself, and besides, she had just wanted to be alone. Under the circumstances, was that so much to ask? She had left those crazy cows weeping even harder than before and crawled into her bunk. buried her face in her pillow and cried like a goddamn baby. If she weren't such a coward, none of them would be going through this right now, none of them would be waiting for Long to...

To mix up that batch of Kool-Aid, Kelly thought bitterly.

Kelly jumped in her seat as a horrific scraping sound emanated from the front of the room. She looked up to see Don James straining to open one of the windows. Bracing his feet against the floor and pushing so hard the veins in his arms distorted his tattoos, he managed to slide the window up a few inches. Just enough, apparently, because someone outside shoved what appeared to be oversized jumper cables for a car through the gap.

Don grabbed the cables and pulled them further into the room, yelling, "Gimme some slack! More slack!" over and over again. He pulled the cables over to where Long stood. Dropping them, he exchanged a look with the Father, then rushed down the center aisle, between the rows of folding chairs, and disappeared out of the door. Kelly listened to the sound of his heavy footsteps clumping down the

steps and fading away into the darkness. She stared after him for a moment. The door was standing wide open, unguarded. Why didn't she just leave? Because she didn't have any strength left, that's why. If she had had any to begin with.

"The time of judgment is at hand!" Father Long shouted suddenly

Kelly turned to watch the preacher. Long had fallen into pacing in a tight little circle, going around and around like a crazed animal in a zoo. Sweat dripped from his face. His bloodshot eyes threatened to bulge from their sockets. Kelly realized she was wearing her favorite little sundress, the one Father Long had complimented her on. Suddenly she hated it, wanted to tear it from her body. She stared at Long, amazed and embarrassed by the depths of her own foolishness. This was the man she had fallen for? The one she gave up everything for? This lunatic prowling the stage in front of them?

"They'll take it away, you know. They always do," Long told his followers. "That's why those soldiers are here. Study your history. You'll see. And you don't have to go back very far to find an example." His pacing stopped suddenly and he spun awkwardly on his heels to face the crowd, nearly falling down. "What have I told you about the prophets?" he shouted.

Nobody answered. Kelly's eyes flicked around the room. Many of the people were weeping, some hanging their heads in silence, not wanting to witness the horrible transformation that had overcome their shepherd. But there were some who gazed on in awe and rapt attention, still drawn to the man's charismatic power. Mark Brody, seated in the front row, was one of these. When several moments had passed without a response to Father Long's question, Brody turned to look at the others, his teeth clenched together, eyes moist but sharp.

"Well?" Brody snapped at the congregation. "Where's your faith, brothers and sisters?"

Still no answer, although someone sobbed loudly. Wearily, Long held out his hand to Brody. "Come here, Mark."

Brody twisted in his seat, turning back to face the preacher. Long adamantly thrust the hand at him. "Come," he insisted. "Join me. I need to have the faithful close at hand when the Vessel returns to walk among us and mete out his judgment."

Leaving his chair, Brody proudly walked over to stand a few yards away from Father Long.

Holy fuck, Kelly thought. Please, God, if you're really truly up there, do not let this happen. Something was moving outside. She could hear it.

A *thump* at the steps. Another. Kelly was afraid to look. Something was banging its way up the steps, making a hell of a racket. Seated in front of her, Roger (or Robert) turned his head, looking past her. The

chubby man let out a soft gasp. She *had* to look.

Don James, Curtis Rickles and three other men were dragging in what appeared to be a rather large body wrapped in canvas. Two more men followed, lugging the wooden beams that would make up the cross. Kelly watched in stunned silence as the canvas-bound figure was slowly dragged past, up the aisle. The sound as it slid the floor was the eeriest thing she'd ever heard.

"Kelly?"

She started at the sound of her name. For a moment, she wasn't sure where it had come from and she glanced around frantically. Long. It was Father Long. Hesitantly, she looked toward the preacher. He smiled at her, but the smile no longer held any charm. Perspiration traveled the folds in his face, rivers of sweat outlining his bared teeth. "Kelly, would you please close the door?"

"Um... Close the door?"

"Yes. Could I trouble you, please?"

How could she possibly do that? She couldn't even move. Why did he want the door closed, anyway?

"The door, Kelly," Long commanded.

Roger (or Robert) rose from his chair. "I'll get it."

"No," Long called out, his voice stopping Roger (or Robert) in his tracks. "Sit down." Long was staring at her like a snake at its helpless prey. "I want Kelly to do it."

I'll throw up, she thought. Everyone was looking at her, waiting for her to comply with Father Long's order. If I just sit here and ignore him, maybe this will all stop.

"The door, Kelly."

Trembling, Kelly lifted herself from her chair. The sweat-drenched bare skin on her back peeled away from the metal with an audible sticky sound. She noticed that she had sweated through the fabric of the dress; her nipples were clearly visible through the drenched cloth. A number of the male congregation, young and old, were staring at them. Why the hell were they hard?

Kelly stumbled as she stepped past the feet of people seated between her and the aisle, catching herself on the backs of the chairs in front of her. Ribbons of sweat trickled down her bare legs, soaking into her cotton socks. How long had it been since she had left her seat? She felt like she'd been moving to close the door for hours, like she'd been walking through molasses. Like she was dreaming. Dreaming. How nice it would be if she were only dreaming.

Somebody started hammering on something. Reaching the aisle, Kelly looked towards Father Long. Some of the men at the end of the room were nailing the cross together, while Rickles and Don James began carefully unwrapping the figure in the canvas. Kelly turned and

shuffled towards the open door, moving like a zombie.

Run, girl! No, I can't run. They'll catch me. Do things to me. Maybe even kill me. Stiffly, she reached out, gripping the edge of the door. She teetered there for a moment, trying to quell her nausea. Then she slammed the door shut, her weight lending volume to the sound. A few people gasped at the noise. Somehow, it made her feel better.

She considered returning to her seat, but decided she'd rather stand. Standing, that's almost a show of courage and strength, she told herself. Almost. And besides, being on her feet would make it easier to run if the need arose. The men at the front of the room were blocking her view, but she could see that someone was tying a large, bulky object up with a length of rope. She saw Curtis Rickles give Father Long a sober nod. Long turned to face the congregation once again, bringing his arms up, palms skyward. Like Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, Kelly thought. Her head felt cloudy, thick. She wondered where those soldiers had gone, if they were somewhere close by. "I say to you again," Long's voice boomed. "The time of judgment is at hand!"

Behind him, Rickles and the others began to hoist the makeshift cross.

Kelly watched in horror as the figure of Jason Voorhees appeared from within the small crowd of men, arms outstretched, wrists and ankles bound to the wooden beams.

The cross rocked slightly as it was brought upright and locked into place. Jason's body shook, then was still. Kelly realized that the cables Don had dragged through the window were attached to the corpse, clamped to narrow metal rods the men had driven into the moldering flesh of Jason's thick neck. A dense black sludge oozed like tar from the open wounds.

You guys have been watching too many old horror movies, Kelly wanted to yell. She felt too sluggish and weary for a confrontation; it was easier to simply stare and not think too much. Like watching television.

Long appraised the body crucified before him, let his eyes trail along the cables to where they exited through the window. A beatific expression on his sweat-glazed face, he addressed his stunned flock. "The rebirth of the Vessel is upon us." Long stepped forward, smiling. "Do not fear His judgment, for only those who do not give themselves over to the Lord shall know His anger."

Long bent and picked up something from the floor. It was about two-and-a-half, maybe three feet long, wrapped in cloth. *His scepter?* Kelly wondered.

Carefully, reverently, Long unwrapped the item. Several loud gasps went up from the congregation upon sight of the machete blade.

"The instrument of His judgment," Long explained. He approached

the crucified figure of Jason Voorhees and respectfully laid the machete at the base of the cross. Rising, Long returned his attention to the congregation, Jason's tattered, lifeless body looming over him. "Camp Blood, they've called this place," Father Long began. "Many have seen it as a decadent blight. A scar upon God's creation, a gathering place for sin and debauchery." He shook his head. "So blind... Those people are so blind. If only they could see with the eyes of faith, they'd know the truth."

Kelly felt her stomach tightening as Long's impromptu sermon continued to build. It was really going to happen, the maniac was going to do it. The preacher stalked the floor, jabbing a finger at the flock. "You have seen through the lies. You have embraced the truth. You see with the eyes of faith. You know what Camp Crystal Lake should rightfully be called. For it was here that God chose to deliver unto the faithful His Heavenly Vessel... His very hand upon the Earth. This place, this ground—this is the Holy Land." Father Long raised his hand towards the body of Jason. "Tonight, the Vessel will walk again amongst mankind, dealing out the Lord's judgment! Tonight, the avenging angel Jason Voorhees will go forth to continue His mission to cleanse the Earth of all those who live in sin!" Long punctuated his fiery words with a violent shake of his fist.

At that, Curtis Rickles, standing near the open window, nodded to someone outside. Kelly heard an engine turn over, catch, roar to life. The generator Rickles had towed behind his truck. Everyone, Father Long included, stood staring at the corpse bound to the cross. Rickles, obviously relishing his position, signaled to whomever was outside with a snap of his clenched fist.

The whine of the generator increased feverishly. Suddenly, Jason's body was jolted violently as a massive burst of electricity surged through the cables to the rods plunged into his neck. Flung into an intense fit of twitching and jerking, the corpse thrashed upon the cross as the power coursed through the rotting meat that hung on its bones. One of his legs kicked free of the rope that bound it. The cross swayed dangerously, not stable enough to endure the brutal spasms.

"Enough! ENOUGH!" Long shrieked. Bits of filth and torn, smoldering fabric from the convulsing figure rained down on the preacher.

Rickles signaled again and the generator was hurriedly shut down. With the power gone, Jason's body shuddered one last time, then sagged against its bonds. Acrid smoke rose from within his tattered clothing. The smell of burnt flesh drifted throughout the room.

It didn't work. Kelly felt suddenly giddy. It didn't work, they just cooked him. She let out a clipped, nervous laugh. If anyone else heard it, they didn't let on. The only sound Kelly was aware of was her own

labored, panicky breathing. She gaped at Jason's still, ravaged body hanging limply on the cross. Father Long stood beneath the unmoving figure, staring up at his failed vision. "Curtis," he said after a long moment. "Please examine the body."

Curtis Rickles looked none too pleased to be given the task. His eyes flicked from the corpse to Long and back again. "I'm sure it's just fine," he said, voice pinched.

Slowly, Long turned his head to glower at his most loyal assistant. "I'm asking you, Mr Rickles, to check for signs of life. A heartbeat, perhaps." Fear rising within him, Rickles's gaze traveled across the faces of the men nearby, those who had helped raise the cross. Don James stared back at him with an expression that would have killed a lesser man. The others didn't seem much more eager to help him out. Despite everything else, Kelly found that she was glad to be here to witness Rickles's obvious terror. Serves the bastard right.

"Brody," Rickles said, picking on someone. Mark Brody swallowed hard. "Mark." Rickles forced a toothless smile. "I... bestow... this honor upon you," Rickles told him, deftly passing the buck.

Brody's dark skin glistened with sweat. He looked to Father Long for approval, but Long's attention was focused on Jason's lifeless corpse. Uncertain, Brody stepped towards the cross; then, realizing he was going to need something to stand on, he grabbed a folding chair from the front row. Cautiously, he moved past Father Long and gently, quietly, placed the chair on the floor directly beneath the imposing figure. Brody gazed up at Jason. Wispy tendrils of smoke drifted languidly from the eyeholes in the battered hockey mask. Trembling a little, Brody stepped up onto the chair. Kelly held her breath. The entire room seemed to do the same. The reek of scorched flesh was terrible at the back of the room; she could only imagine how bad the stench must have been from Brody's standpoint. As if in response to Kelly's thought, Brody gagged once, then caught himself. Standing upright atop the metal chair, he ever-so-gingerly leaned in towards Jason's chest to listen for a heartbeat. Carefully. Slowly. Trying not to touch the body and—

Jason's head jerked up. Yellow eyes burned from the dark depths of rotted sockets.

Kelly screamed.

Brody stood frozen, mouth hanging open.

Father Long looked positively ecstatic.

The massive murderer furiously ripped his bound wrists free from the crossbeam he was lashed to, not understanding that the ropes were all that held him aloft. Toppling forward, Jason slammed into Mark Brody, knocking him from the chair. Brody hit the floor, the wind going out of him. He looked up to see Jason collapsing on top of him. Then

the rope that still held Jason's right ankle to the cross jerked him to a stop. He dangled above Brody, clutching fingertips brushing the wooden floor.

With terrifying silence, Jason Voorhees flailed at the man pinned beneath him. Snagging a handful of Brody's shirt, he pulled him closer. Brody choked out a pained scream as Jason's thick fingers closed on his throat. With his free hand, Jason gripped the man's shoulder.

Then he pulled.

Slowly, agonizingly, Mark Brody's head began to separate from his body. Blood spewed from the shredded flesh in a crimson fountain. His horrible screams rose in pitch as his vocal cords were distended and torn.

"SINNER!" Long screamed, jabbing an accusatory finger at Brody's struggling form.

Brody's head tore free from his twitching body, sending a carpet of gore spraying across the floor of the makeshift church and spurring many in the to their feet. Kelly stared on in paralyzed fear as Jason kicked his leg free from the last rope and lifted himself to his feet, still holding Brody's blood-spattered head. The homicidal giant used the prize as a bludgeon, swinging it at the panicked men who scurried past him. Screams filled the air.

And finally, Kelly ran.

NINE

Jason Voorhees stood at the head of the room, the cross teetering at his back and the screaming, cowering congregation spread out before him like a salad bar of murderous possibilities. Eyeing the machete on the floor, he hurled Mark Brody's head aside and bent to pick up the familiar edged weapon. Brody's head, a death mask of agony, hit the wall with a wet *thwack*, leaving a gory stain as it bounced away, finally rolling to a stop at the feet of Curtis Rickles. Rickles stared into Brody's blood-smeared, dead eyes. He'd seen a lot of nasty shit during his days in the Corps, but none of it had ever made him want to piss his pants and run like this did.

Rickles tore his gaze from Brody's lifeless eyes in time to see Jason striding towards him, drawing that machete back to take a swing. The ex-Marine made move to dive out of the way, but slipped in the blood that oozed from the stump of Brody's neck and crashed through the first row of folding metal chairs. Coming up in a noisy tangle with the seats and stained with Brody's sticky blood, Rickles watched as Jason stopped, slowly turned his head to sight in on his target once more, and came towards him again. That's when Rickles pissed his pants. Following Kelly's lead, numerous other God-fearing church folk had high-tailed it for someplace less deadly, but, amazingly, others still remained in their seats, believing themselves to be witnessing the Will of God fulfilled right there in front of them, in gory color and 3-D. These folks simply stared in silence as Jason Voorhees closed in on Curtis Rickles, ready to see how he'd fare when faced with the Lord's judgment.

Father Long, too, merely watched as his good right hand quailed before the hand of God. Don James had jumped through the window that the generator cables fed through, smashing through the glass and wood without concern for the multiple lacerations he suffered in doing so. A couple other men had followed him, getting off a little easier thanks to James's initial clearing of the way.

Frantically, Rickles fought to extricate himself from the folding seats. Jason took a swipe at him with the machete, the blade glancing off one of the chairs but still taking a chunk of meat out of Rickles's right forearm. Rickles howled in pain. Freeing his left arm, he snatched up a chair and flung it awkwardly at Jason. The edge of the chair smashed into the killer's hockey mask, scarring the hard plastic and clattering to the floor. Other than to snap his head back, the impact had no discernible effect on Jason himself.

"Get the fuck away from me!" Rickles shrieked, clutching his wounded arm and trying to crawl away from Jason.

Those members of the congregation who had remained in their seats

knew *that* that kind of language wasn't going to help Mr Rickles's cause at all. A second folding chair bounced off of Jason's barrel-like torso, this one thrown by Roger (or Robert)

"Don't interfere!" Father Long yelled at the would-be hero.

His attention diverted from Rickles for a moment, Jason turned to face this new challenger. Seizing the opportunity and not giving a goddamn what happened to the man who had helped him, Rickles quickly kicked himself loose from the last of the chairs. Slipping and sliding in all the blood, he scuttled away on all fours, back towards Father Long. Roger (or Robert) stared in shock as Jason stomped towards him, kicking metal chairs from his path. Pausing, the resurrected mass murderer found himself distracted by the assortment of potential victims surrounding him: in particular Meredith Host, who was screaming at the top of her rather attractive lungs and tugging at her father's arm in a vain effort to make him leave from Jason's killing ground.

"Daddeeeeee!" Meredith shrieked, straining to pull the man from his seat. "Please, please, please, Daddy, come on!"

Unmoved by his daughter's appeals, Mr Host maintained a firm grip on his wife's hand. They both stared vacantly at the Heavenly Vessel, moved beyond reason by this vision of spiritual justice being played out before them. Prioritizing his victims, Jason raised his machete and viciously slashed at Roger (or Robert), cutting a gaping fourteen-inch gash in the man's chubby midsection from right shoulder to navel. While Roger (or Robert) watched his intestines begin to slide forth from the bloody wound, Jason pushed his way toward the Hosts.

"Mommy! PLEASE!" Meredith cried. She heard a loud, wet splat and looked over to see a large pile of Roger (or Robert)'s guts hit the floor. They were followed closely by Roger (or Robert) himself.

"It's going to be just fine, honey," Mr Host said, not taking his eyes off the approaching figure of Jason Voorhees.

Meredith watched Jason push the last few chairs that separated him from the Hosts out of the way. Her eyes followed the machete blade as he raised it high...

"I'm a sinner!" Meredith screamed into her father's ear. "I have lust in my heart, Daddy. Do you hear me?"

Meredith's father looked calmly up at his daughter. "Then you must kneel and be judged—"

He was interrupted as the blade of Jason's machete sank deeply into his skull, cleaving his face like a Sunday ham. Meredith screamed one last time as she saw her father's left eyeball ooze from the socket and slide down the machete blade, leaving a gooey snail trail behind it. The disgorged eyeball came to a stop resting against the back of Jason's rotted hand. Leaving her mother to face her fate alone, Meredith ran

like hell for the door. She paused, looking back just as Jason transferred the machete to his left hand and flicked Mr Host's eyeball from the right. Then he drove the blade through her mother's chest, the tip ringing off the back of her metal chair as it exited past her spinal cord. Meredith was out the door and down the steps before her mother's body could tumble to the floor.

The girl, nubile and shapely teenager that she was, was doubtless Jason's prime choice for victim-hood, but Meredith's hasty exit still left the killer a number of suitable victims. Charlotte Rutherford and Denice Keenan, huddled together on the floor near the wall. Jason made his way towards the women, stepping on Roger (or Robert's) copious innards as he went. Something that may have been yesterday's supper spurted from the ropy strands of intestine. Three members of the congregation still held their seats and watched the show, apparently willing to stay until the final whistle. Other than them, only Father Long, Rickles, Charlotte and Denice remained in the cabin.

"Father," Rickles wearily called to Long. He held his left hand pressed tightly to the machete wound on his right forearm, but the blood was practically hosing out with every beat of the man's heart.

Long, mesmerized by the sight of Jason stalking the two obvious sinners groveling on the floor, didn't hear, or didn't want to hear.

"Father!" Rickles yelled. He thought he might pass out at any moment.

Long turned to shoot him an ice-cold stare. Rickles had seen the look dozens of times in combat. The man had clearly lost his grip. "I think it's time we left." The preacher started to admonish Rickles, but the ex-Marine cut him off. "To gather the congregation. So we can reward the faithful... for passing judgment."

Father Long considered the man's words. A scream erupted from the other end of the room. Long and Rickles looked to see Charlotte Rutherford's body being hoisted in the air on Jason's machete. As the woman struggled and shrieked, her body slid down the length of the blade, bringing her face-to-face with her killer. Taking hold of her hair, Jason cruelly twisted the blade, then ripped it through the woman's side. He dropped the corpse to the floor and bent down towards Denice Keenan.

"Yes," Long said distractedly. He turned back to face Rickles. "Perhaps we should go."

Rickles helped the preacher through the broken window, then painfully clambered out himself. As he tumbled into the dirt outside, Denice's screaming became a gurgle, and then was suddenly cut off.

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Kelly's nagging guilt over leaving Meredith behind began to get the better of her. She skidded to a halt and looked back towards the

cafeteria. People—dark shapes silhouetted against what light there was—were spilling from the cabin, running in all directions, disappearing again in the shadows. Maybe one of them was Meredith. Maybe she got away. She gave a moment's thought to going back and looking for the girl, but the ghastly screams coming from within the building spurred her on. She started running again.

Jason Voorhees. She'd grown up on spooky bedtime stories about the relentless killer who only preyed on sluts and dopers, figuring it was just a legend, something parents told their kids in a pathetic attempt to keep them out of trouble. Like La Llorona or that Krueger guy with the knives on his fingers. Then, as she got older, she started seeing stories on the news and she knew Jason Voorhees was real. And now she was running from him.

Kelly rounded the main building and fell down, scuffing the palms of her hands in the dirt. No, no, no! You do not fall down when you're running from the killer! Grunting, she pushed herself to her feet and took off again.

Kelly had no idea where she was heading; she only knew that she had to run. What was she doing? She couldn't run all the way back to town, she already felt like she was going to have a heart attack. She ran out across the parking area. The school bus, the Scout and Rickles's old pickup truck were all there, but she ignored them. No keys, and she wasn't exactly Josie the Juvenile Delinquent, so hotwiring one of the vehicles was out of the question. She'd seen it done in movies, but she'd also seen movies about women who could maintain satisfying relationships and she didn't know how to do that, either. Kelly paused, resting her elbows on her knees to catch her breath for a second. People were still screaming back at the cafeteria building. *The church*. What a sick joke. They're dying, and I'm leaving them. And she was probably the biggest sinner of the bunch. The irony of it all made her want to puke.

She looked out across Crystal Lake. The moonlight shimmered on the water's surface, sending long, crooked fingers of yellow-orange reaching towards her. How many goddamn morons had come here over the years, knowing about the murders that had happened? And they just kept coming. People are so fucking stupid, Kelly thought. Myself included. But wait a second. The moon was straight overhead. Those lights on the water were coming from the other side of the lake.

Somebody had a camp set up over there. The soldiers. It had to be the soldiers.

Kelly raced down to the water's edge, running as fast as her legs would carry her.

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Meredith sat wedged on the floor, underneath the old writing desk in

the cabin she and her parents lived in, clutching her knees to her chest and staring at the door. The room was dark. The screams from the church—except she didn't want to call it a church anymore, stuff like mass murder and mutilation doesn't happen in a church—had finally ceased a few minutes ago. In a way, the ensuing quiet was even scarier.

No one else had returned to their cabins. She knew her mom and dad weren't coming back, she saw what Jason Voorhees had done to them, but where were the other families? Dead? Were all of them dead? What if *everyone* was dead? Meredith shuddered. If they were all dead, that meant she was alone in the camp. Alone with Jason Voorhees.

She whispered a little prayer, then stopped. What good would it do? What good had it done her parents? Jason had slaughtered them like animals. And they certainly weren't sinners. She knew they weren't; they were good people.

As for Father Long...

Meredith began to pray again. Long had taken enough from her already. There was no way she was going to let him rob her of her faith. She prayed for her mother and father, and for everyone else Jason had killed—not just from the ministry, but everyone, all his victims. And she prayed for Kelly.

Kelly.

Oh God. Maybe she was still alive. Meredith hadn't seen her when everything went crazy. It didn't mean she wasn't in the cafeteria when Meredith ran for her life, but... Think, girl, think! Meredith squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember when she'd last seen Kelly. When she closed the door. Before Jason came to life and started killing everybody, Kelly had been standing by the door. Then she must have gotten out.

Maybe I can find her, Meredith thought, starting to scoot out from under the desk. Then she caught herself. How could she go outside? Jason was out there.

Meredith felt paralyzed, not wanting to stay in the cabin alone, but terrified of going out into the dark. Her shoulders shook and she blurted out a single quavering sob, then fought it down. I don't wanna cry again. He might hear. What was it Kelly had told her to imagine when she got scared at night? Meredith smiled. Kelly told her she heard a lot of squirrels at night, especially when she had to pee really bad and no one else was awake to go to the bathroom with her.

Where was everyone? Would Kelly really run off and leave her? Maybe, if Meredith had made her mad enough when she grabbed her boob. It was so wrong, she knew. But she couldn't stand it, she just wanted to kiss her. Kelly's lips looked so soft, and they were always shiny, like she was born with perfect lip gloss glazed permanently across her mouth. And her little tummy was so round and cute. Eyes

closing, her breathing shaky, Meredith reached out her trembling left hand and dreamily caressed the imaginary curve of Kelly's abdomen in the air. Her tongue flicked out to wet her lips and her right hand crept towards the warm place between her legs. Suddenly, her eyes snapped open. What is wrong with me? Sniffling, Meredith glanced around, embarrassed.

Thump!

Whirling, Meredith turned towards the sound, looking up at the window behind. Someone was looking back at her.

***

Element leader Chris Seaver viciously yanked at Samantha Noon's short black hair like he was tugging the reins on a galloping horse.

"Fuck!" she hissed, spittle flying from her lips.

With a resonant *thwack*, Seaver slapped the woman on her bare ass, watching the plump flesh undulate as he took her from behind. Noon let out a gruff squeal. A half-hour earlier, Chris Seaver and his comrade-at-arms, the lovely Ms Noon, had slipped away from the rest of the strike team and ventured near the shore of Crystal Lake, where they had proceeded to peel one another from their cumbersome uniforms. Now, in a small clearing within the trees and undergrowth, they were expressing their rather hearty feelings for each other in a way that even the basest animals might find disconcerting

"Harder, you fuck!" she snarled. It was only his on her scruffy locks that prevented him from and tumbling back into the bushes.

"Yo, trick—you almost knocked me outta you!" Seaver bent forward and zestfully bit the woman's left shoulder, in what could almost have passed as a loving gesture. "You are my delicate French pudding," he purred tenderly. His tongue flicked across her earlobe. Then he smacked her on the ass again, eliciting a guttural snarl of pleasure.

Noon roared as a wave of pleasure soared through her. With one arm wrapped around a tree, she reached up with the other and snagged what she could of Seaver's close-cropped blond hair, and most of his ear with it. She yanked his head down and planted a sloppy, open-mouthed kiss on him, drooling down his chin in the process.

Then Kelly Mills burst through the trees, doing a doubletake as she ran past the two.

"Holy shit!" Noon yelped upon sight of the woman. Springing upright, she assumed a fighting stance.

Kelly came to a lurching stop, her eyes instantly falling upon Seaver's nether regions. "Oh my God!" she yelled, turning away.

Seaver just stood there for a moment, dumbfounded. Then he clasped his hands in front of himself.

"Who the fuck are you?" Noon demanded, her fists raised in front of

her. "What are you doing out here?"

Kelly risked a glance at the nude, sweat-slathered woman who was bobbing around like an Amazonian prize-fighter. Ridiculously, Kelly put her hands up as if someone were holding a gun on her. "I don't know! I mean, I heard someone and—"

"Goddamn right you heard someone," Noon said.

"I recognize her. She's from the church," Seaver said.

"That's right." Kelly spun towards him, then looked skyward, embarrassed by his nudity. Remembering to cover his ass with his hand, Seaver bent and fished around in the dark until he came up with his pants.

"It figures fucking church folk would be sneaking around trying to watch people get it on." Noon lowered her fists, standing brazenly naked in front of Kelly, who did her best not to look. "What are you doing here? Spying?"

"No!" Kelly snapped. Collecting herself, she tried to explain. "They... I think... I think a lot of people are dead over there."

Noon stepped forward, thrusting her chin towards Kelly's face. "Spill," she commanded, her teeth tightly clenched.

Kelly took a few breaths, not sure how to continue. "Do you... know who Jason Voorhees is?"

Seaver and Noon swapped a look. A satisfied smirk tugged at Noon's lips.

***

Man, oh man, Hobb thought. Were his instincts on the money or what? He knew there was some telling them, it thing weird going on at Long's woodland church, and, from what this woman was telling them, it sounded like all hell was breaking loose over there. He thought he'd heard screams earlier, but since he wasn't exactly a forest-dwelling guy, he figured them to be the call of some kind of bird—or maybe Samantha Noon, but he didn't want to give Seaver the credit for being able to elicit that much wailing from a woman.

After Chris Seaver and Samantha Noon had brought Kelly into the strike team's camp, she had collapsed in tears. From what she had told them, Hobb was amazed she wasn't in shock. Jesus Christ, Jason Voorhees resurrected before her eyes and going on a killing spree? He had felt guilty at first for not acting on his suspicions when the team had been at Camp Crystal Lake earlier, but really, what could he have done? Dragging the woman out of there in front of Long and all his cohorts? That would've gone over great. Of course, it might have prevented whatever happened over there. *Shit*. All he needed was another one of his miserable fuck-ups to live with.

Leaning back against one of the LAVs, Hobb watched as Jeff

Townsend talked to the woman, trying to calm her enough so he could keep her talking, wring every drop of potential intel out of her. Hobb had to hand it to his friend—the guy was good. Holding Kelly's hand, brushing the hair back from her tear-streaked face, the sympathetic way he spoke to her... Jeff seemed to have genuine affection and concern for the girl. Somebody like Seaver would have just screamed at her to get the information he wanted.

Hobb looked at Seaver, who knelt at the back of another LAV, prepping the Operators for an insertion into Camp Crystal Lake. Seeing Samantha Noon standing over her sweetie pie, her face still flushed from the underpants polka they'd surely been dancing to, Hobb couldn't help but think that insertions were the only thing on Seaver's mind.

Somewhere just beyond the lights of the camp, a branch cracked in the forest. Hobb instantly shouldered his FN MK46 machine gun, while around him a variety of weapons were leveled at the trees surrounding the team. Bright red beams of laser light crossed in the darkness as the Operators sought a target. Come on out, Hobb willed. Come on out and let's get this over with. Moments passed. Not another sound. Slowly, the team returned to their positions. Ortega, Hurley, Leonard, and Acheson continued to stand watch, their weapons at the ready.

Seaver approached Hobb. "When we go in, you're staying here," he said, deliberately pitching his voice for the other team members to hear. He cocked his head toward Kelly. "Thought you might like to babysit."

Chris Seaver had about four inches' height on Hobb, and he hated looking up at the ass-wipe more than just about anything he could think of at that moment. "Y'know," Hobb said, "Jason likes to kill people who have sex."

Seaver sneered. "Then I guess you'd better keep your hands off her sweet little ass." He stepped closer to Hobb, getting in his face, trying to back him down.

Hobb held his ground, the muscles in his jaw tightening. I'm not going to punch him in the face, he told himself. As much as I'd love to. Instead, he merely widened his blood-red eye, staring intently up at Seaver. "Do me a favor while you're out there, will ya? If you hear a noise, wander off by yourself to investigate." He gave Seaver a quick wink with the bloody eye. "That's a classic maneuver."

"Seaver!" Jeff Townsend snapped.

The Element Leader turned towards his commanding officer, "accidentally" jostling Hobb with an elbow.

"Let's hat up, we've got work to do."

Seaver moved to assemble the team. Hobb sighed deeply, grateful to

be rid of the man. Still holding Kelly's hand, Townsend got to his feet. It was like watching King Kong leaning over Fay Wray, Hobb thought. "We're gonna take care of this, Miss Mills," Townsend assured the girl. "Meanwhile, you'll be in good hands." He smiled at Hobb. "Keep an eye on Kelly while we're gone, Walt, or you'll answer to me."

"Are you sure she wants my eye on her?" Hobb asked, displaying his eight ball hemorrhage for the girl. He was hoping for a laugh, but instead she just looked alarmed.

"Would you rather I take him along?" Townsend asked Kelly. She shook her head and smiled a little, appreciative of the attempt to cheer her up.

Releasing her hand, Townsend walked over and knocked fists with Hobb. "I'm taking fifteen men. You'll be here with Leonard, Hurley, Ortega and Acheson. That should be plenty of firepower, but even then, you all might want to get in one of the LAVs and lock the fucking door," he said soberly. "In fact, consider that an order."

"So you're really leaving me here to cool my heels? I thought you had a little faith in me."

"You know I'd rather be doing this differently," Townsend said. "But I'm already in some serious shit with Lauren, and if you get all sliced and diced, I'm up shit creek where that woman's concerned. So, under the circumstances..."

Hobb nodded. He knew it went way beyond that. The other Operators didn't trust him, and Townsend didn't want to make things any worse by taking him along. "All right. But watch your ass out there, King Size." For the first time he could remember, Hobb was genuinely scared. This wasn't some bunch of loser drug-dealers, or a deranged husband holding a gun on his kids, or even any of the truly weird shit he'd faced since joining the Agency. This was fucking madness on the hoof. Everybody knew the stories about Jason Voorhees: unstoppable, unkillable. Hobb forced a smile for his buddy. "Unless he cuts you up into little pieces we'd never find a coffin to fit you." If, his voice hadn't cracked, nobody ever would have guessed he was close to crapping himself.

"Just a fucking douche bag with a machete," Townsend said. "I'll bring you his hockey mask." He clapped Hobb on the shoulder and trotted away, joining the fifteen Operators who would accompany him. They piled in through the back hatch of one of the LAVs and within seconds, the massive vehicle's engine thundered to life.

Hobb jumped as Kelly's hands closed on his upper arm. She looked at him plaintively. "I just want to stay close to you, okay?"

He stared at her for a second. "Yeah," he said softly, the word swallowed up by the noise of the LAV's engine. Looking away from Kelly, he watched as the armored transport jerked into gear and

rumbled away into the night, its lights flickering through the trees. Then all that was left was the low rumble of the engines, fading slowly as the vehicle headed for Camp Crystal Lake.

TEN

Meredith had screamed for what seemed like forever. Then the figure at the window darted away and she could hear it moving outside, and then the cabin door swung open—

And Curtis Rickles stood there. His right arm was wrapped in a blood-soaked bandage and he held a hunting rifle in his left hand. He still wasn't wearing his dentures, and Meredith could a streak of blood smearing across his toothless gums as he spoke.

"For God's sake, quiet down, girl!" He quickly through the shadowy cabin to kneel beside her. As much as Meredith disliked and even feared the man, she couldn't stop herself from flinging her arms around his neck and squeezing him tightly. Her tears moistened the collar of his shirt.

"Is everyone else dead?" Meredith said, her face buried in his neck. He smelled sour, almost like an old diaper, but she was too scared to let go.

Mr Rickles lifted his hand and hesitantly stroked her hair. "No. They're all in the main house. The ones who... got out." He dropped the rifle to the floor and embraced Meredith, crushing her against him. That was when she felt the dampness of his jeans and realized what the smell was. The man had wet his pants. She released her grip on him, but had to squirm a bit before he got the hint and finally let go of her.

The trip to the main house had been terrifying. She knew Mr Rickles used to be a Marine and he kept his gun at the ready the whole time they were running, but she was sure she had seen the bulky figure of Jason standing behind some trees, watching them. She was sure she had seen that mask disappear into the darkness. And Mr Rickles was slow because of his screwed-up left foot, the one he'd hurt back when he was still in the military. They'd made it, though. Meredith sat on the floor in the big room of the main house with everybody else crowded around. Somebody had even made coffee. She wanted to find out who it was so she could scream at them for being so stupid, trying to make things normal. There was nothing normal about any of this, there never had been. Her parents... what was wrong with them? How had they been so foolish? She was stung by a pang of guilt. What was wrong with them was that they were dead. They had trusted Father Long—everybody had—and they were all paying for it.

Meredith sipped bitterly from her cup and looked around at the others as they enjoyed their tea party. Mr Rickles stood near the front window, still holding his rifle and pulling the curtains aside to peer out into the darkness. The wound on his arm was obviously still bleeding badly. Somebody should sew that up, she thought. Don James held a similar guard post at another window. He was cut up some himself,

from going out that window back in the cafeteria, but none of his wounds appeared to be too bad.

Meredith's eyes traveled the room, moving from one blank, stunned face to the next, trying to sort out who was missing. Why was it so hard to figure out? She didn't see Denice, and she knew what had happened to Mr Brody, of course... Besides her mom and dad, who else was gone? That chubby man who liked Kelly... Where was Kelly? "Kelly?" Meredith got to her feet, looking frantically around the room. "Is Kelly here?"

"Honey—" Mr Rickles began.

"No!" Meredith shouted. People turned towards her with mystified expressions, as if she were speaking a foreign language. Meredith grabbed the closest person, Patricia Krenkle, and shook her. "Where's Kelly?" Meredith shrieked into the woman's dull gaze.

"Hey now," Manny Krenkle, Patricia's husband, softly rebuked. "There's no need for that sort of thing."

Ignoring him, Meredith's eyes swept the room again, desperate. "Is there anyone upstairs?"

"Just me."

Meredith spun towards the pleasant voice. Father Long was slowly, majestically, making his way down the stairs, like he was about to meet his date for the prom. Meredith's mouth fell open. The man had actually taken the time to freshen up. His skin looked pink and scrubbed, his hair neatly combed and still damp from the shower. He wore a crisp button-down shirt and clean slacks. "What are you...? How could you...?" Meredith began, her words trailing off. She didn't even know where to start.

Father Long fixed the girl with a sympathetic look. "I'm so very sorry, child. I'm afraid Kelly didn't make it."

Meredith stared at him, anger rising within her. She wasn't a child, and she wasn't stupid. "She did too."

"I'm sorry," Long said, continuing down the stairs.

"She had to," Meredith snapped. "She got away, she was by the door when Jason came to life—"

"Can anyone truly escape the hand of God if they are unclean in spirit?" Reaching the bottom of the stairs, the father stood in front of Meredith, looking at her as if she were a five year-old whose hamster had died. "I had my concerns about her all along, you know. That she wasn't... righteous, in her heart."

Meredith felt her teeth grinding together.

"After all," Long continued, "The girl had lived... Well, let's just call it a rather full life. She lacked a moral compass. And the good Lord, in His wisdom, simply didn't approve of that sort of behavior."

Meredith slapped Father Long, the impact snapping his head to the

side. When he turned to look at her again, his gaze had gone cold. An angry crimson handprint adorned his left cheek.

"You're lucky, you know," Long calmly told the girl. "She would've led you down the same path."

"What about my parents, you asshole? My mom and dad weren't righteous enough? They never did anything bad in their lives!"

"Language, honey." Long smiled patronizingly. "Apparently, you were mistaken. You saw what happened in the church. The Heavenly Vessel stood before your parents and they were judged to be unclean. This is not the time to lie to ourselves when our hearts know otherwise, girl. We can only conclude that your mother and father had committed vile sins against the Lord."

Furiously, Meredith flung herself at Long, but was captured by Rickles before she could reach the preacher. The ex-Marine struggled to restrain the girl, her fists and feet flailing wildly. "Let me go!"

Rickles pressed his lips to her ear, whispering. "Gentle down, darlin'," he coaxed. "Gentle down now, this won't help anything."

Meredith continued to struggle. Long held that smile plastered across his face, but took a couple steps back just for safety's sake,

"Please, honey," Rickles said. "We're all in the same boat here. Let's not rock it."

Exhausted by everything she'd been through, and with her momentary fury spent, Meredith relaxed in Rickles's grip. The ex-Marine availed himself of the opportunity to nuzzle her hair, inhaling the girl's scent and smiling. She bristled, but was too weak to fight him off.

"What would your parents think if they saw you now, young lady?" Father Long scolded Meredith. "Swearing? Fighting? Disrespecting your elders?" He gave his head a sad little shake. "They may have been judges as sinners in God's eyes, but they raised you better than that, I think."

"You killed them," Meredith hissed.

"No," Long said, gazing at her intently. "I freed them. Freed their souls, so that they might find salvation." He stepped forward. Still clutching Meredith tightly, her feet dangling above the floor, Curtis Rickles moved aside, allowing the preacher to enter the big room. The surviving members of the congregation looked expectantly to their Shepherd.

Long gestured towards Meredith. "This young girl is obviously in need of further spiritual guidance. I'll have to see to that," he added thoughtfully. "In fact, her salvation is the duty of every one of us." Meredith caught the quick glance Father Long shot towards Rickles, who smiled in return.

"But what about the rest of us?" Susan Perkins asked.

"The rest of you have passed the first test." Falling into his practiced routine, Long began slowly pacing as he addressed his followers, considering his words carefully. "Those of us who were... heaviest with sin... have been struck down. We here in this room have been given a second chance. Don't be fooled, there are still sinners among us—" He whirled dramatically, pointing at each and every member of the flock in turn. "Of this I have no doubt. And so I implore you to shun the black web of lies your sins will weave. Face the truth and know in your heart that you must cleanse your soul or face the merciless judgment of the Heavenly Vessel."

Sickened by what she was hearing, Meredith stared at everyone who had crammed into the room. They all gazed reverently at Father Long. How did he do it? What did the man have that allowed him to sway these people into believing something that was so completely insane? Fear. That had to be the answer. Not fear of Long, but fear of God. Fear of what awaited them on the other side.

Rickles was still holding her up off the floor. Feeling uncomfortable and foolish, Meredith whispered to the man. "Please. Put me down. I won't fight you anymore." She could feel the man's entire body relax, Rickles allowed the girl to slip through his arms, obviously relishing the opportunity to feel the curves of her body slide past. Once on her feet again, she smoothed her clothing and collected herself. I will not let fear control me, she told herself. I will not. It was fine to be afraid of the maniac with the machete who was prowling around out there somewhere, and of the so-called man of God standing before her. But of God Himself? No, she loved Him, as her parents always taught her to do. She would never discover what made her mom and dad believe in Father Long. Maybe it was simply that they were old and had begun to fear death so much that they were desperate for assurance that they'd make it to Heaven, and they saw that in Long. She could forgive their mistake. But these people here in front of her? After everything they'd seen that night, still hanging on Long's every word, still believing he offered them some sort of salvation? They deserved no forgiveness. They were just stupid. "We could *leave*, you know," Meredith said calmly.

Scowling, Father Long stopped pacing, annoyed at the girl's words. "I... am... speaking, young lady."

She ignored him. "We could just get in the bus and go."

Rickles laid a hand on her shoulder, pulling gently at her. "Meredith, please..."

She shrugged his hand away and took a step forward, out of reach. "I'm not trying to fight, or cause problems," she continued. "I just think the smart thing is to get away from here. We have to tell someone what happened, we have to report the murders..."

"Murders." Long snorted.

"Shut up," Patricia Krenkle suddenly blurted. The woman stared angrily at Meredith

"I'm sick of your disrespect and your blasphemy!"

Meredith looked at the woman in disbelief. "Are you insane?"

Patricia leapt to her feet, her face twisting. "You should've been judged! You shouldn't even be here!"

"Mr Rickles," Long said, his implication quite obvious.

"You should have been chopped up back there, with the other sinners!" Krenkle screamed.

Meredith was dumbstruck.

Curtis Rickles stepped up behind her, taking her hand. "Meredith, darlin'—please. This isn't helping anyone."

She looked up at the man, tears welling in her eyes. "I just want to leave," she whispered. "I want us all to leave, go someplace where we can be safe."

"We can't do that, honey. We can't leave. But I can promise you, I'll keep you safe here."

How can you even say that, she wanted to ask. She struggled to bring the words up, give them voice, but she no longer had the strength. Wearily, Meredith leaned her head forward, resting it on Rickles's chest. He still smelled like piss, and he still gave her the creeps, but she felt like he was the only one on her side.

"You all heard that, did you not?" Long said, sermonizing again. "You heard the words coming from that woman's mouth." He began to pace once young more. "That is the voice of fear. Fear... is an instrument of evil." He was twisting things around, taking what she'd said and using it to further his own ends. "I'm not saying to you that this girl is evil. No, on the contrary, she can be saved. I still believe she can meet the Vessel and pass His glorious judgment. It's the fear that is evil. Insidious. You mustn't fear the Vessel. He—is—an—instrument—of—salvation!" Long smacked his fist into his open palm, punctuating each word as he spoke it. "Of love." His eyes traveled across the rapt faces of his flock. "An instrument of the love that God has for each and every one of us, and for all of His creation!" Long turned to look at Meredith, her face still buried in Rickles's chest, the man's wounded arm encircling her. A tiny smile played across Long's face. "Please, please... Do not fear that."

Shut up, Meredith thought. Shut up, I can't take anymore of this...

Turning, Long's smile faded, replaced by a somber expression. "What we need to fear," he told his followers, "are those who would take the vessel from us. Usurp the Lord's almighty authority. Why do you think those soldiers were here this afternoon? Hmm?" He played the question to the group, looking around, waiting for an answer. "Do

you think they were here to make sure our lease was in order? Or perhaps to see that we had adequate indoor plumbing?" The father sighed, his eyes closing wearily. "No. They have come to sever the hand of God. To take away everything that we've worked for, everything we've sacrificed for, everything we have suffered for."

"Damn them," Susan Perkins muttered, then looked around her with embarrassment.

Father Long pointed at the woman. "Yes. Damn them. That's just what the Heavenly Vessel will do. But we cannot simply sit back and allow it all to play out; not when we've struggled for so long!" He shot a meaningful glance at Rickles. "The time has come for the faithful to defend what is right. To defend what is ours." His fists clenched tightly, shuddering, the knuckles whitening. "To defend the very will of the Lord!" Long heaved a deep breath. "If that means laying down our lives... well then that, too, is the Lord's will." Long looked around the room. The congregation was deathly silent, awestruck at the words the preacher had spoken.

Meredith collapsed fully against Rickles, unable to bear the weight of it all any longer. How could she fight it? She was just a little girl, after all. Just a naive little girl. Rickles's embrace tightened around Meredith's limp body. "It's all going to be okay," he promised her.

"I know," she whispered. "I know."

***

Townsend ordered Seaver to halt the LAV off the highway, out of sight of the two-lane road, but still some distance away from Camp Crystal Lake. He had originally intended to simply roll it on into the camp, kicking up God's own noise and stirring up everything within a thousand yards of the place, but then he started wondering: would Jason Voorhees have the sense to get the hell out of there if something like that rolled into his favorite woodland retreat? The psycho freak sure as hell knew these woods better than the strike team did. They might never track him down. Better to park out here and hoof it. Who knew? Maybe a handful of tempting machete-fodder would draw the killer out and they could square off with him sooner rather than later. Yeah. Then Townsend could wrap this thing up and deliver Walter Hobb back to Lauren so the woman could have a moment's peace. He had thought he was doing Hobb a favor, but more and more, Townsend was beginning to feel like it had been a huge mistake to ask Walter to join the team, to take him away from his home and his wife again.

It might not have been the most desirable way to leave the Agency, but Walt had stumbled onto a way out, even if it was forced on him. Shit. Townsend knew that was the only way he'd get out himself. And in the days since he'd been handed this command, he'd begun to think

that maybe getting out was goddamned appealing.

He just wasn't sure he had the balls to walk out and quit. What would he do with himself? Various scenarios had played through his mind, but nothing seemed right. He supposed he could take a shot at being a private investigator, put his training to use that way. Or he could just go get himself a job as the bouncer at that fancy titty bar outside of town. Not having the luxury of a girlfriend, though, a job like that could wind up being real depressing. Staring at sexy gals all night, then going home to an empty apartment? Probably a bad idea. No doubt about it, Walt had been given a beautiful opportunity to leave all this behind, and Townsend had to go and screw it all up. Lauren would probably never speak to him again.

Townsend was jarred from his thoughts of early retirement as Seaver pulled the LAV off the dirt road, the right side of the vehicle's hefty nose clipping the sign that read "Camp Crystal Lake," with the words "Home of the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel" painted beneath. The sign toppled, splintering under the armored transport's huge tires. "Oops," Seaver said. The rear hatch opened, dropping downwards to create a ramp. In formation, the team disembarked from the vehicle, Townsend in the lead, gripping his beloved shotgun. Chris Seaver strode cockily down the ramp after them.

"Seal it up," Townsend whispered.

Seaver complied, closing the LAV's hatch. Turning to join the others, he fired up the laser on his FN MK46 and flicked his night vision goggles down. The Operators all wore radio headsets, but the entire goddamned area around Crystal Lake seemed to be a giant black hole as far as radio was concerned, and the things were all but useless.

The fifteen Operators had taken up defensive positions around the armored transport, each keeping an eye on their area of responsibility. The moon had disappeared behind cloud cover leaving the area as dark as hell. Townsend gazed around the perimeter, the green display of his night vision goggles revealing thick forest surrounding them. The big son of a bitch could have been anywhere out there.

Townsend clucked out a soft signal to the strike team and they began moving forward at a quick pace, weapons leveled in front of them. Noon and Stilton brought up the rear, walking backwards to provide cover in that direction. The team moved with surprising quietness, only the occasional twig snapping beneath a boot to give away their presence.

How does a guy wind up leading an assault on Camp Crystal Lake to bring down Jason Voorhees, for Christ's sake? Townsend felt like he was on another planet. It was bizarre. Then it struck him: how the hell did he wind up with this command? This was a showpiece operation for the Agency; he felt they would have put someone with more

command experience in the top slot. left him in his familiar position, if they put him on the team at all. Townsend's heart leapt into his throat. Unless the Agency was cleaning house... Had he been set up to take a big, bloody fall? Holy shit.

The only member of the strike team that he'd handpicked was Walter Hobb. The others were assigned by the Agency, and every last one of them had some kind of blemish on their record. Or was a loudmouth, like Townsend had been over the screwed meth lab raid and the Agency's treatment of Hobb. And, thinking back on it, perhaps the Agency had caved in a little too quickly to his request that Hobb be a part of the team. Was the strike team on a suicide mission, something the Agency came up with to rid themselves of a few problem children? Townsend suddenly found himself wishing that the radio headsets worked a little better. He tapped the tiny microphone that curled out from his helmet. He needed to share this notion with Walt, see if his buddy thought he had lost his freaking mind. Matter of fact, maybe it would be a good idea to postpone this little raid, head back to base camp and talk some shit over...

Movement to the left. Something darting behind a tree. Several guns —including Townsend's—whipped in that direction. Fifteen Operators held their breath. About four feet up, a dark shape protruded from behind the left side of the tree trunk. Somebody wasn't doing a very good job of hiding. The shape moved slightly. Wait for it... The shape crawled around to the front of the tree. Fat and furry.

"What the hell is that thing?" Noon whispered.

"Raccoon," Townsend said. The fuzzy little beast was staring right at him, glowing eyes peering from within its black mask.

Everybody breathed again.

Then Jason Voorhees stepped into Chris Seaver's path, raising his machete.

Seaver had the chance to fire three rounds, all of them kicking up dirt and leaves a few yards behind the masked murderer. Then the machete blade came down, splitting Seaver's night vision goggles and the screaming face beneath.

Samantha Noon whirled just in time to see the gout of blood spurting upwards from Seaver's face, the fluid tinted green by the night-vision effect. "Nooo!" she howled, elbowing her way through the others.

Townsend tried to draw down on the madman with his shotgun. Everything was a flashing frenzy of green shapes. Jason was right in the middle of them. There was no way to get a clear shot without risking taking down one of the Operators. Someone fired a couple rounds. Someone else cried out in anguish. Townsend saw a bright flash as Jason's machete lashed out again, laying Blair's thigh open to the bone. Blood gushing, the man dropped to the dirt, clutching his leg.

The hockey mask glowed in Townsend's goggles. He had a clear shot. Just as the big man pulled the trigger, Noon shoved past him and he put the load of buckshot into a tree, kicking up bits of wood and bark. Then Seaver's twitching body fell in front of him. The man was trying to scream, but everything above his lower jaw was split wide open, cleaved all the way back to his soft palate. He was gargling on his own blood, spitting out flesh.

Sporadic gunfire and more screams. Townsend was sure he saw slugs impacting in the killer's torso, hammering him backwards, but that goddamned machete continued hacking and slashing through the team. Somebody else went down, their head landing a few feet away. Townsend heard Noon curse and saw her weapon spit fire. Jason took a swipe at her, the machete blade glancing off of her Kevlar helmet. The impact dropped her to the dirt. As Jason raised his machete for the killing blow, Townsend put a round of double-ought buck into his chest. The killer staggered back, away from the team. Suddenly, gunfire erupted all around Townsend as the strike team finally had a clear shot at their attacker. Amplified by his night-vision goggles, the muzzle-flashes were blinding.

"Hold it, hold it, hold it, HOLD IT!" Townsend yelled.

The gunfire ceased. Through the drifting haze of gunpowder smoke, Townsend could see... *nothing*. Jason was gone. Four Operators were down. Blair was the only one of those still moving. "Circle up!" Townsend ordered. What was left of the strike team rapidly formed a tight circle around their fallen comrades, weapons trained on the dark woods that enveloped them. "Call it off!" Townsend barked. Immediately, the team members rattled off their names in sequence. No response from Seaver, Miller or Hall. Blair was making all kinds of noise, so Townsend checked him off on the survivor column, for the moment, at least.

Moseley, a young guy who looked like he might have shit his pants just a little, hurried forward and knelt alongside Blair. Withdrawing an inch-wide zip-tie from a vest pocket, Moseley quickly began wrapping it around Blair's injured leg, to serve as a tourniquet.

Pushing her night vision goggles up on her head, Samantha Noon went to Chris Seaver's side. His twitching had stopped. So had the gargling. The blood was overflowing from his dead mouth and spilling into the dirt. "Motherfucker," Noon hissed. It was about the most romantic thing the woman could have said.

Blair was gasping and moaning, rocking back and forth and gripping his bleeding leg. "Move your hands," Moseley told him. "Move 'em. I can't tighten this thing with your fingers in the way!"

Relenting, Blair released his hold on the leg. The blood flow instantly increased, bubbling out like a garden fountain. "Oh shit..." he moaned

softly. Moseley hurriedly tightened the zip-tie and locked it off.

"I'm hit," Stilton said.

Townsend moved to check out the man's wounds. Stilton painfully lifted his right arm. The sleeve of his uniform was torn open and bloody.

"I don't think it's bad," Stilton said optimistically.

Townsend examined the wound. "Hurts like a son of a bitch though, doesn't it?" Stilton nodded. "Moseley, when you you're done with that, here's another one for you." Townsend said,

"A minute," Moseley answered. "Press down on it for now."

Townsend took a firm grip on Stilton's wound and applied pressure. As he watched the blood trickle through his fingers, Townsend weighed the possibilities. Was it a setup? If so, the Agency had already cleared out a pretty good number of the troublemakers. Samantha Noon stepped up in front of him, glowering at him like a pissed-off lioness.

"We need to keep moving," Townsend told her. "See what went down at Camp Crystal Lake." What he had wanted to say was, "Let's get the hell back to base camp, I think we've been ass-raped by our bosses," but he still didn't feel certain enough about his concerns to voice them to the others.

"Fuck all those stupid Jesus-freaks. Far as I'm concerned, whatever happened, they got what was coming to 'em."

"I can't help but agree with you. But that isn't the point. We've got a job to do."

Noon sneered. "That job just ran the fuck off into the bushes after killing three of us. We need to be on that motherfucker's ass like the Coyote on the Roadrunner."

"That's a really bad analogy, Noon. Shit didn't exactly work out for the Coyote," Townsend pointed out.

"Whatever. All I'm sayin' is—"

"I know what you're saying," Townsend interrupted. He realized he was squeezing Stilton's arm a little too tightly. The whole team was tensed up, scared as hell but not willing to admit it. He didn't need Noon crawling up his ass to add to his problems. "And when you're in charge, we'll be the Coyote. But right now, we're gonna be the guys who go into Camp Crystal Lake to see what the fucking situation is. Clear?"

Frowning, Noon watched as Moseley hustled up and took over dealing with Stilton's gunshot. As Townsend released his grip on the man's arm, blood gushed from the wound, spattering the ground.

"Is that clear?" Townsend repeated, wiping his hands on his pants.

"Clear," Noon snapped.

Satisfied, Townsend called back over his shoulder. "Blair?"

"Still with you."

"Can you move?"

"I sure as hell ain't stayin' here," the man said. "But I can't guarantee I won't slow you down."

Townsend turned to look at Stilton. Moseley had cut the man's sleeve open and begun treating his bullet wound. It was pretty bad—the MK46 delivers some hellish stopping power, and Stilton had taken the round at close range. "How's it look, Moseley?"

The medic continued to work as he replied. "I can fix it."

"Good man. Stilton, Moseley: I want you two to take Blair back to the LAV."

Moseley looked stricken. "By ourselves? I'm the only one who isn't wounded, what if Jason—"

"Sisson will go with you," Townsend said, annoyed but understanding Moseley's concerns."

"Fuck," Sisson said. Short and bulky, Sisson looked like a cartoon armadillo in his body armor protective gear. He carried a Milkor 40mm grenade launcher, the fat ammo cylinder cradled against his belly. "I didn't even get a shot off during that rumble."

"Well, maybe you'll get lucky on your way back to the LAV," Townsend said snidely.

"Let's hope not," Moseley muttered, continuing to fuss with Stilton's wounded arm.

Hoping like hell he was wrong about the Agency, Townsend rounded up the others and set out for Camp Crystal Lake.

***

The sound of gunfire in the distance drove Hobb to his feet in the crew compartment of the LAV.

"Sounds like they found themselves a target," Acheson said, grinning. "Hell, we might be going home tonight."

The sporadic, distant popping suddenly increased wildly, then just as quickly faded away to nothing. Hobb looked at Kelly. The girl's eyes were clamped shut and she was nibbling on her lower lip. Everyone was silent and listening intently. Several moments passed without any more gunfire.

"Mr Jason Voorhees, meet Mr Superior Fire power." Bruno Ortega swapped a high-five with Hurley.

Hobb wished he could share Ortega's confidence. Damn it. He should've been out there. Or he shouldn't have been there at all, he wasn't sure which. With the amount of respect he commanded from his fellow Operators, he'd almost be better off working the grill at White Castle. Useless. He felt useless, and that was the one thing he couldn't tolerate.

"Why hasn't Townsend radioed in?" Hobb said.

"Were you takin' a piss or something when we tested the headsets?

You know the radio doesn't work for shit out here," Acheson said.

Hobb gritted his teeth. Shit. He had forgotten all about that, and now he looked like an even bigger dumbass.

"Besides, what's the point?" Ortega stretched out on the floor, trying to get comfortable. "They're gonna roll back in here with Jason tied to the hood of that LAV like a goddamn deer, man."

Or maybe they're all lying in pools of their own blood, Hobb thought.

"Yeah, and if the radios did work, those pussies would just be callin' in wanting us to do the heavy lifting," Hurley said, smirking. "Askin' for help from the real heroes."

"That's us," Ortega said, his eyes closed.

"Maybe we should head over there," Hobb suggested. "A couple of us could stay here, in the other LAV, while the others go check things out."

"Why create unnecessary work?" Hurley shook his head. "You're lettin' this chick's stories go to your head. I'm tellin' ya, with the firepower those boys are carrying, they could bring down King fuckin' Kong. Jason Voorhees doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell."

Hobb sat down again, next to Kelly. "I hope you're right."

Ortega raised his head and opened one eye to look at Hobb. "Dude, you worry too much. Exhausted by the effort he'd expended, Ortega lowered his head again. "Just think about what they're up against, for Christ's sake."

Hobb caught Kelly staring at him. Her expression told him she was thinking the same thing.

ELEVEN

"Loosen up," Townsend told his team. He didn't know if it was fear or something else, but they couldn't seem to maintain a reasonable distance from each other. They kept closing together, preparing for the same kind of attack Jason had made before. They had to stay close enough so that the psycho couldn't pick them off one-by-one, but far enough apart to unload on the bastard if he should ambush them again.

Townsend ran a roll call in his head, counting off the Operators accompanying him. Noon. Garb. Connolly. Howard. Lovinger. Chaffin. Marr. That was eight men, including him; or seven men and one ass-ripping hellcat, if he categorized Noon realistically. Was it stupid to split up back there and send the others back to the LAV? Maybe they should have all gone back to the transport and driven the rest of the way to Camp Crystal Lake. It's not like they had to worry about scaring Jason off, obviously. Besides, the trip to the camp was just to assess casualties. Fuck, that's what he should've done. It would've occurred to him if Noon hadn't been barking at him, and if he weren't so worried that the Agency wanted them all to die. Jesus, what was he doing? Talking himself into being a fuck-up, that's what. And now he was trying to blame it on somebody else. What a terrific commander he was. He'd made a bad choice, now they had to deal with it. At least he'd had the presence of mind to tell Moseley to give the team an hour, then bring the LAV up to the campground. They'd have a ride home. It was all going to be fine. Just as long as Jason didn't leap out and hack all of them apart in the meantime.

The last forty minutes had given Townsend a unique insight into Walter Hobb's feelings. Three men were lost in seconds, two more wounded. Like a switch being thrown; one minute they were traipsing through the woods, the next their faces were split open or their heads cut off. And now we're marching along like nothing has happened, fulfilling the mission, while the bodies were still cooling off out there. No wonder Walt was so tormented, especially with the blame being laid on his doorstep. They could see a few lights from Camp Crystal Lake through the trees now. The place was deathly quiet. How many people had he counted when the team had first arrived? Twenty-five? Thirty? Were they all dead now? And what the hell had they been thinking, getting into this? That woman who'd come out of the woods—what was her name? Kelly. She was young and pretty. You'd think she'd have had the sense to find a new church to attend, once Jason Voorhees had made an appearance on the altar. Maybe she spent Friday nights bowling with the Manson Family, too.

Townsend signaled to the others and the team came to a halt. They

were about twenty yards from the tree line and the parking area beyond. The whole thing felt vaguely similar to the strike on the yuppie meth lab, only the cars parked outside weren't as expensive. And, of course, the campground was full of dead churchgoers.

Townsend stared at Camp Crystal Lake. The place seemed sinister when viewed through the eerie, greenish cast of his night vision goggles. Show some movement. Somebody's gotta be alive in there. He scanned the area carefully, then panned back again. There—someone inside the school bus. How had he missed it before? The parking lot was illuminated by a string of lights hanging overhead. It was lit up like a little-league ball field. Wait—two people on the bus. Probably ran there to hide from Jason. *Good God*. Could they be the only survivors? Feeling sick to his stomach, Townsend signaled to the rest of the team and they moved forward once again. As they stepped past the tree line and into the parking area, he focused on the bus. A bright flash lit up Townsend's night vision viewfinder.

Then the bullet hit him in the face.

***

The look in Curtis Rickles's eyes said it all as he watched Townsend collapse to the ground, a ribbon of blood trailing behind. *Semper Fi, motherfucker*. Rickles had moved the bus, parking it parallel to the main building, with its door facing the cabin to provide an escape route. Then he and Stan Day took seats, loaded up their rifles, and settled in to wait. He knew when he'd heard the gunfire earlier that it wouldn't be long before the strike team made their assault on the church.

Of course, he had personally seen to Meredith Host's safety before going off to defend the church. Had to protect the wriggling and shapely little embodiment of his future. Some folks might say there wasn't much of a future to be concerned about, now that Jason Voorhees was sorting the wheat from the chaff amongst the ministry's followers. Rickles knew otherwise. He would readily admit that he'd done more than his share of sinning in the past, but such was his faith in Father Long. Rickles knew that the good father's ministrations had cleaned his soul up real sweet, and anything untoward he might be harboring in there could just as easily undergo the Lord's own pressure-wash, and he'd be as good as new. Hadn't he evaded Jason's judgment back in the church, and come away with nothing but a cut on the arm and some urine-soaked trousers? In Rickles's mind that was like having God come down and say, "Son, you're okay. Now go forth and do some multiplying with that saucy young thing you've had your eye on."

Even better, Meredith's attitude towards him seemed to have

changed, thanks to the soul-sorting hubbub Jason had brought to the congregation. Back there in the main cabin, she'd gentled down just fine when he'd told her to, even held on to him in what he had to admit was quite the boner-inducing embrace. And when he took her off to find a safe place to sit out the battle he knew was coming, she'd even given him a loving kiss, right on the lips, no less. Let's face it, the girl was coming around to his way of thinking. Frontier times were here again, with the commandos acting the part of the bloodthirsty Indians on the warpath, and Jason Voorhees doing a fine job as the hungry bear, stalking the forest.

Rickles smiled broadly and fired two more shots at the invaders, the second one finding its target. Another man down. The ex-Marine hated combat, but not nearly as much as he hated people trying to fuck with his shit. Next to Rickles, Day was blasting away like a wild man. Rickles was pleased to hear gunfire from the roof, and from the woods on the lake side of the parking area. His men were defending the faith, all right.

Then the strike team returned fire.

Slugs pounded the school bus, rocking the vehicle. The 5.56 caliber rounds punched through the thin metal, turning the inside of the bus into a death trap. Time to get the hell out of there. Rickles slapped Day on the shoulder, getting his attention. "Let's beat feet!" the ex-Marine insisted.

Staying low, the two men hustled off the bus as bullets smashed through the windows and thudded into the tired old seats, sending tufts of stuffing into the air. Rickles was out the door first, leaping to the ground and almost fell down when his bad left foot came down wrong. A slug tore through the side of the bus about four inches away from him, whizzing past and thunking into a post on the cabin's porch. The ex-Marine bolted for the cabin's door, with Stan Day hot on his heels. Even with gunfire lighting up the night, Rickles could only think about how Meredith would greet her conquering hero once the dust settled.

***

Sprawled in the dirt, Townsend felt like he ought to be writhing in pain, but the bullet had severed something vital and he couldn't even twitch. He lay there, slowly working his jaw, trying to belt out orders to his team. All he could here was a disgusting gurgle, accompanied by the grinding of bone. The slug from the hunting rifle had torn his lower jaw apart and punched through his spine before zinging off into the woods. Oh, and he could hear lots of gunfire and shouting. Everything had gone wrong. Staring up at the sky through the night vision goggles, Townsend realized Frenchie would be working her shift at Lefty's

Lounge this time of night.

After Townsend was hit, the whole place had gone up like the Fourth of July. Fucking Jesus-Freaks must've had men planted all over the campground, and somebody had had enough sense to figure the strike team would be using night vision, so they did a particularly good job of keeping themselves out of sight.

Samantha Noon had seen Lovinger take a bullet and drop, but the man had quickly scuttled back into the trees and was returning fire. The rest of the team was trying to do the same. Noon opened up with her FN MK46, putting several rounds into a cluster of trees across the parking area where she'd seen muzzle flashes. Somebody over there screamed. She heard a *thwipping* sound next to her ear. That one almost had her name on it. Moving backwards and sustaining fire, she hustled for the trees, slipping behind the first fat oak she came to.

Peering out, she saw Connolly make a break for the school bus and the two trucks parked nearby. No wonder; the guy was carrying a shotgun and needed to close the distance between himself and any targets of opportunity. His head came apart before he could make cover. Noon watched Connolly's body do a jerking dance before it slumped forward in the dirt. What did they call this place? Camp Blood? She recoiled as a big slug chewed into the tree she hid behind, showering her with splinters. Some of those assholes were carrying cap guns, but a few of them had obviously done their share of elk hunting before Jesus called them to service. "Anybody got a Milkor?" Noon shouted. How long before those assholes would show up at the campground? She pulled a frag grenade, yanked the pin and hurled it as hard as she could. No one would ever accuse Samantha Noon of throwing like a girl. The grenade hit the top of the school bus, bounced, and went off between the bus and the cabin. What glass was left in the windows of the bus blew outwards and the front windows of the cabin were blown in, flinging deadly shards into the building.

Inside the cabin, Manny Krenkle shrieked as his body was ribboned by the flying glass. Wet chunks of the man splattered the big room. One of his hands flopped onto the floor near Rickles, who had only taken a few slivers in his back. Gritting his teeth in pain, Rickles ticked off seconds in his head, counting down to the moment Don James and his men would enter the battle.

Townsend's vision was clouding. Or maybe his goggles had been damaged and were failing. Whatever it was, he couldn't see well anymore. Breathing wasn't exactly a walk in the park, either—he kept choking on all the blood in his throat. If he could just roll over, maybe it would drain out of his mouth. He strained to flop himself over, but his muscles just wouldn't cooperate.

Samantha Noon couldn't figure out what the hell the religious idiots

were doing. Didn't they realize the team was here to protect them from Jason? Bible-thumping assholes were going to have to die, that's all there's to it. She pulled another frag grenade, clamped the pin her teeth, feeling like John Wayne, and tugged it loose. Then bullets came from behind and pummeled the ground around her—coming from the rear. Fuck. The sonsabitches have flanked the team. There were muzzle flashes going off all over the place out there. Oops. She was holding an armed grenade. Noon tossed it towards these new bastards, watching as the woods lit up. She thought she saw part of a leg go whipping into the air. Lead was flying at the team from every direction. Noon clenched her teeth. With Townsend down, somebody needed to call the shots. She didn't figure she could make things much worse by barking a few orders. "Operators!" she yelled. "We are LEAVING!" That's if they could make it out of there at all. Unleashing a brutal hail of gunfire towards the rearward assault, Noon bolted for denser forest, shouting as she ran. "Let's go, let's go, LET'S GO!"

The other members of the team didn't hesitate, laying down covering fire, doing their best to get out of there. Only Lovinger was dragging ass, forced to hop on one leg thanks to the slug he'd taken when the ambush began. Chaffin, coming up behind his fellow Operator, hooked a shoulder under Lovinger's arm and helped him along, letting the wounded man provide most of the from the camp itself covering fire for them.

While the gunfire coming slowed, then stopped, Don James and his defenders of the Ministry dogged the strike team, keeping up a barrage of harassment fire to be sure they didn't slow down in their retreat.

Townsend lay there at the edge of the woods, alone, still staring up at the night sky. Aside from the gunfire he could hear moving away from him, things were relatively quiet.

Then he heard heavy footsteps.

Someone was coming up behind him. As the footsteps came to a stop, Townsend watched through his goggles as Jason Voorhees leaned into view, staring down at him. Thanks to the night vision goggles, he could see into the eye holes of the ragged hockey mask, see the rotted meat that surrounded Jason's blank, yellow eyes.

"Fuck you," Townsend said, only it came out as an incoherent gurgle. Townsend continued to stare into those eyes, even as Jason raised the machete to strike.

***

"That's a fucking firefight out there." Hobb stomped to the rear hatch of the LAV and unlocked it.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the hell are you doing, man?" Leonard yelped. "Fucking Jason could be out there!"

Hobb looked back at the other Operators. "Not if he's tied to the hood of the other LAV." With that, he shoved the hatch open. It clanged into the dirt and Hobb ran down the metal ramp.

Without my gun, he thought. He stared nervously into the darkness around the strike team's camp. The sound of gunfire echoed from across the lake. From Hobb's position, he couldn't get a look at whatever was happening. He's not gonna get me. If they're shooting at him over there, he's not over here. Hobb tried to make himself move and find a spot where he could see Camp Crystal Lake. *Fuck it—he might get me*. "Hey, Hurley—toss me my gun, will ya?"

Hurley picked up Hobb's FN MK46, lobbing it to him. It made a satisfying clack as he caught it. The weight of the gun was immediately reassuring

"Wait!" Kelly yelled at him. Hobb turned to look at the woman as she ran halfway down the ramp, pausing to fix him with an earnest gaze. "I wanna go with you," she said.

He looked at Kelly, puzzled. "Why?" Turning his back on her, he took off running through the strike team's base camp.

After a moment, Kelly followed.

Hurley, Leonard, Acheson and Ortega exchanged a look. "What the fuck?" Ortega said, shrugging. The men slapped their helmets on, grabbed their weapons and tromped down the ramp.

Hobb ran through the soft dirt on the water's edge. Across the lake, he could see muzzle flashes lighting up the night through the trees. The open water carried the crackle of gunfire and the sound of shouting to him. "Holy shit," Hobb muttered,

He didn't even hear Kelly running up behind him. "Is it Jason?"

Hobb shook his head. "No." He turned, fixing her with a hard look. "No it isn't. Why didn't you tell us your church buddies happened to bring guns along on their little campout?"

She stared at him, overwhelmed. "What?"

"Look over there. That's not a church picnic going on, sweetie-pie. It's a fucking gun battle. Technically, for it to be called a battle, both sides have to be shooting at each other. Now why didn't you tell us?" Hobb shouted at her.

"I didn't know." Her lip trembled.

Great. Now I made the damaged little church-girl cry. Hobb wished he were somewhere else, behind the counter at a bank, maybe.

Acheson, Hurley, Leonard and Ortega came racing up to join Hobb and Kelly, all four of them staring wide-eyed at the firefight taking place. Suddenly, a quiet fireball lit up the trees over there, followed a few seconds later by a loud *whump* as the sound caught up.

"Grenade," Hobb said.

"What do we do?" Leonard asked.

"We go help 'em," Hobb replied.

"That's gonna be a fucking half-hour drive by the time we get there," Ortega pointed out. "It could all be over by then."

"All the more reason," Hobb said. "Now let's move our asses."

Grabbing Kelly's hand, Hobb took off back in the direction of the base camp, leaving the other four men looking at each other. Ortega broke into a run, Acheson, Hurley and Leonard following his lead.

Hobb was strapping Kelly into her seat when the other men finally caught up. "You stay here with the other LAV," Hobb told Acheson. He was a little bit surprised when the man nodded and moved to comply.

Hurley started for the driver's seat, but Hobb stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "I'm driving."

"But this is my vehicle," Hurley said.

"You could be wrong in that assumption." Hobb shoved past the stupefied Operator, practically daring the man to try and stop him. Behind them, Leonard closed the hatch and locked it.

"Have you ever driven one of these things?" Hurley asked.

Hobb was already settling into the driver's seat. "Of course not. Now sit down and shut up."

Not waiting for anyone to either sit down or shut up, Hobb put his foot to the floor. Kelly's fingers clenched the edge of the bench while she watched Hurley go tumbling past to slam into Leonard's legs. Both men wound up on the floor in a pile. Ortega, clinging to a metal bracket overhead, barked out a laugh.

"There's not a goddamn funny fuckin' thing about any of this," Hobb snapped. His best friend may very well have been dying. Hobb coaxed a little more speed from the LAV.

***

The LAV's tires thrummed along the two-lane blacktop laying down the miles at sixty per. The slow part of the trip had been navigating the dirt road leading from the old housing development site. Hobb had taken out more than a few trees in the process of learning to steer the enormous, armored transport, which only added to the frustration and anger building within him. Once they hit the highway, though, it had been smooth sailing—and thanks to the late hour, there had only been one old flatbed truck to contend with on the road. Hobb had very nearly run it into the trees lining the highway, and in avoiding such a tragedy had created a bit of an ecological disaster by trenching the hell out of the dirt shoulder, but the look on the old farmer's face when he saw the LAV coming at him had been priceless. Overall, however, the big-ass military transport handled only slightly worse than Hobb's old Chevy Nova.

In the crew compartment, Hurley was whining like a baby at having

the driver's seat taken away from him. He cocked a thumb at Hobb and whispered to Leonard. "All that asshole did was slow us down by jumpin' the wheel. Uprooting all those trees burned a lot of minutes." He shook his head, sneering. "Once a fuck-up, always a fuck-up."

Overhearing, Kelly tilted her head to look at Hobb wedged into the driver's compartment. She had yet to notice that Ortega, seated across from her, was passing the time by trying to peer up her rumpled sundress, the skirt pushed way up on her pale thighs. Bruno Ortega lolled his head around, looking for the proper angle that would allow him to see the glories that lay buried under the thin fabric. The woman was obviously wiped out, exhausted from everything she'd been through, and the best thing about that sort of fatigue was that she didn't notice how far up her luscious legs the skirt had ridden when she slumped wearily in her seat. No matter what direction he tilted his head, however, he couldn't find the sweet spot. Smoothly, like Lance Burton in body armor, Ortega provided a little magician-style sleight-of-hand by reaching up to scratch a non-existent itch on his stubbly chin. As he lowered his hand, he surreptitiously unlatched his seat belt, covering the click by clearing his throat. With his hand once more at his side, Ortega shifted in his seat, sliding down till his ass hung off the edge of the bench. This provided him with a better angle for the visual exploration of Kelly's inner thighs.

He smiled. Better, but not quite what he needed yet. He was sighting down on some seriously tasty flesh under the woman's skirt, but his objective still remained tantalizingly out of view. He scooted his butt down another inch. Almost there. If only she'd slump down a little more. Another shift of his ass brought him closer. He froze in delightful anticipation when Kelly twitched her leg slightly, opening her thighs the tiniest bit further. He thought that maybe she knew what he was up to, and was going to give up the goods, Hell, a good-looking broad like that was only going to waste in church. Maybe she was looking for some action. Ortega felt a little giddy at the thought, but fought it down. He was going to have to be sly about this, so Leonard and Hurley wouldn't try to horn in on the fun. Ortega rolled his head to the left. Then a little further. *Bingo*. It was uncomfortable holding his head and body in such an awkward position, but there, right before him, hiding back in the shadows, was the panty-clad highway to heaven itself. Looked like Kelly was a white-cotton girl. To him, something about that was even naughtier than the tiniest of things. He toyed with the idea of firing up the light slung under the barrel of his rifle so he could get a better look, but that would no doubt bring the show to an angry end. Much smarter to simply ride in pleasant silence and enjoy it while it lasted. Ortega shifted a bit, trying to get comfortable. Smiling contentedly, he let his mind go places that his fingers hungered to

follow.

Oblivious to the sly voyeurism going on behind him, Hobb stared out at the old highway as the LAV gobbled it up. The fierce glare of the headlights revealed every pothole and badly patched crack in the asphalt. As the turnoff for Camp Crystal Lake came into view ahead, Hobb's edginess and anxiety increased. Slowing the vehicle a little, he figured he'd risk taking out a few more trees in a *Dukes of Hazzard*-style turn onto the dirt road.

That's when the other LAV roared out of the darkness directly in their path.

TWELVE

Hobb had time to blurt out "shit" before the LAV collided with the second vehicle. The force of the impact lifted Hobb's LAV clear off the pavement, hurling it skyward and skewing towards the left. As the vehicle flipped, Bruno Ortega was thrown from his seat and sent bouncing around the crew compartment. The steel toe of his boot caught Leonard in the face, splitting the man's lower lip open. Kelly screamed, her skirt flinging itself upward to make readily accessible what Ortega had worked to hard to see.

The second LAV, driven by Samantha Noon, skidded wildly across the highway, the back end swinging around towards the driver. The big armored transport shuddered as rubber was peeled off of the eight gigantic tires to scar the pavement with thick, black streaks. Almost parallel to the road when it finally hit the shoulder, the LAV's tires dug into the soft dirt, lifting the passenger side of the vehicle off the ground and slamming it back down violently.

Hobb's head was brutally slung around as his LAV came down on its roof, then went airborne once more. Rolling, the transport smashed through the arched Camp Crystal Lake sign that spanned the dirt road and flipped several more times, tearing up trees and underbrush before coming to a creaking halt, resting upside-down, about twenty-five yards from the highway. A cloud of dust drifted across the two-lane road. Metal groaned. Dying engines rattled.

And, the gentle tone of her girlish voice muffled by the armour plating that surrounded her, Samantha Noon swore loudly. "For the love of fuck's sake!" A clamorous thumping and banging came from within that LAV, as she kicked viciously at the rear hatch before it finally dropped open, unleashing the furious Ms Noon. She stood on the side of the highway, squinting through the dust and panting heavily. Slowly, as the dust cleared, she made out the shape of the other LAV pitched on its back off in the trees.

Inside that transport, Hobb put a hand over his head—or beneath his head, technically—and caught himself as he unfastened his seatbelt and dropped to the roof of the cab. Miraculously, he seemed to be unhurt. In the crew compartment, Leonard was hanging upside down from his seat, struggling to free himself from his seatbelt and bitching up a storm. Blood poured from his split lower lip, running up his face, and into his nose and eyes, choking him. Hobb grimaced as he saw Ortega splayed out on the ceiling. The man's body was twisted into a shape reminiscent of Evel Knievel during his calamitous Caesar's Palace jump. A small trickle of blood ran from his nose. Hobb bent, felt for a pulse. Nothing.

Kelly unlatched her seatbelt and dropped to the floor with a soft

grunt. Hobb looked away from her exposed panties and the woman flipped onto her back and smoothed her skirt. Hurley wasn't moving, either. Goddamn it, Hobb thought, if I killed both these guys because I insisted on driving... He forced the thought away and moved nearer to the man, placing his fingers on his neck. He had a heartbeat, at least. "Hurley!" Hobb shouted. "Hey, Hurley, wake the fuck up!" He turned to look at Kelly. "Sorry, lady. Are you okay?"

She looked at him skeptically. "You just wrecked this stupid tank and now you're apologizing for saying 'fuck?'"

Hobb returned his attention to Hurley. "What can I say, my mama raised me to have manners."

"Then be polite and get me the hell down from here," Leonard screeched, his words distorted thanks to his busted lip. "I'm fuckin' drowning in my own blood!"

Leaving the unconscious man to hang, Hobb went to Leonard's aid. He pulled a knife and held it up. "Hold still."

Seeing the large blade poised near his midsection, Leonard stopped struggling and prepared himself for the imminent fall. With a deft slice, Hobb cut the seatbelt and Leonard tumbled to the LAV's ceiling, landing atop Ortega's broken body. "Sorry, buddy," Leonard offered. Sitting up, he stared gravely at the dead man for a moment.

"You guys are *all* Emily Post and shit," Kelly said.

"Show some respect, lady—the guy's dead," Leonard snapped, wiping thick smears of blood from his face.

Stung, Kelly looked away. "I'm sorry."

Hobb went back to Hurley, reaching under his dangling arms to find the man's seatbelt. "Yeah, I guess we're all full of regret around here."

"What about him? Is he...?" Leonard started.

"He's alive. Help me get him down."

Leonard stood and moved to help Hobb. Taking a grip on Hurley's shoulders, he waited for Hobb to unlatch the seatbelt. "What the hell happened, anyway?"

"We hit the other LAV. Hold tight, now." He released the seatbelt and Hurley's limp body suddenly dropped, twisting in Leonard's grasp. Hobb grabbed his legs and the two men gently placed Hurley on the ceiling, his head practically in Kelly's lap.

"Get his helmet off," Hobb told her.

Somebody banged on the rear hatch. Kelly jumped, jarring Hurley's head.

"You motherfuckers alive in there?" Samantha Noon beat on the metal hatch again.

"We're okay," Leonard yelled. "Mostly," he added, glancing at Ortega.

"I didn't ask if you were okay, I asked if you were alive—'cause when

you open this goddamn hatch, I'm gonna beat every last one of you to death," Noon said.

Hurley's eyes fluttered open and his head rolled around. Hobb bent to peer into the man's eyes. "You all right?"

It took Hurley a second to register. He blinked at Hobb. "I'm not even gonna say I told you so," he muttered.

"Noted," Hobb said. Standing, he stepped past Kelly and went to the hatch. "Let's see if we can get this open."

Leonard grabbed the bolt, straining to slide it back. "It's jammed."

Hobb took a grip on the bolt and the two men wrestled it slowly back, unlocking the hatch. Then, shouldering the heavy steel plating, they began forcing it upwards. As the hatch began to open, Noon's gloved hands appeared at the edge. Two more hands followed, and the hatch rose slowly.

Kelly, meanwhile, carefully removed Hurley's helmet and eased the wobbly Operator into a sitting position. "You sure you're okay?"

"Not really," he said.

When they held the hatch at waist-level, Noon down and wedged herself under the steel plate, putting her leg muscles to work and against it like a weight-lifter doing squats. Then she saw Hobb.

"Cock," she hissed, breaking the epithet into two distinct and quite stinging slurs, "sucker." Suddenly, she let go of the hatch with her right hand and punched Hobb in the face. He staggered back, the blow knocking him away from the hatch.

With Hobb no longer holding it and Noon only using one hand, the thick steel hatch dropped again. Catching it against his back, Leonard shouted in surprise and pain. "Hey, hey, hey!"

Shaking it off, Hobb quickly rushed back to help raise the hatch. The Operators pushed it open to about shoulder level and he looked down at Kelly. "You first," he told her.

Kelly hesitated for a second, glancing up at the fierce expression on Samantha Noon's face. "Come on, Churchy," Noon demanded. "This thing ain't like cotton candy."

Swallowing hard, Kelly crawled hurriedly out into the dirt. Hurley followed. Shifting his grip as he moved, Leonard worked his way out next, still helping hold the hatch up.

Hobb fixed Noon with a baleful stare. Cautiously, he shifted his grip on the hatch as he moved from beneath it. Just as he was slipping out, Noon released her grip. The hatch dropped a foot before the others caught it again. Hobb hustled out from under the steel plate. He was glad to see Stilton, one of the few Operators who seemed to like him, assuming the guy was still in his corner after the LAV wreck. Clapping the man on the shoulder, Hobb turned to look at Noon. She was already walking back to the other transport. Through the drifting dust,

Hobb could see a handful of Operators standing near the vehicle. He couldn't make out any faces, see who might be missing. "We saw the firefight," he said to Noon's broad back. "What happened?"

"Dumb fucking question," Noon said.

Hobb started after her, trying to fight the urge to clench his fists. "Did you run into Jason Voorhees?"

"Dumber fucking question."

Hobb came up right behind the woman, shouting at her. "Where's Townsend?"

Noon whirled on him. "Take a walk down this road and see for yourself, asshole, and you might find parts of a few other people along the way!"

Hobb stared at her. He knew where things were headed as the words tumbled from his lips. "He's dead?"

"*Dumbest* fucking question," Noon snarled, turning her back on Hobb and walking away once again.

"How many?" Hobb asked, looking beyond Noon, trying to count the Operators on the other side of the road. "How many dead?"

Noon ignored him and kept walking.

"I asked you a goddamn question!" he shouted. Is Seaver dead?"

"Still no answer. Not that Hobb needed to hear it. Chris Seaver hated his guts, possibly even more than Noon did, and if anybody was gonna get in his face after the LAV wreck, it would be Seaver... unless he had bought it. Hobb ran up behind Noon, reaching for her. "Answer me, goddamn it!"

As his hand came down on Noon's shoulder, the woman spun and drove a hard fist into Hobb's already-damaged right eye. The flash of pain, as the split over his eyebrow opened up once again, nearly dropped him to the dirt. He staggered slightly, forcing himself to catch his balance.

"Hey!" Leonard yelled, leaving the wrecked LAV and hobbled towards Noon and Hobb.

"Stay out of this," Noon warned him.

Hobb put his hand to his eye. It came away bloody. He stared at the gore running down his gloved fingers. His skull was ringing like someone had laid into him with a sledgehammer. "That's just about enough," he said to no one in particular.

"Oh, far from it, motherfucker," Noon hissed. She darted in and slugged Hobb again, sending him stumbling backwards.

"This is fuckin' bullshit," Leonard yelled, approaching the woman.

Samantha Noon stood with her fists clenched and held high to guard her face, her upper body swaying as she waited for Hobb to fight or flee. She shot an ice-cold glance at Leonard. "You steppin' up to the plate?"

Leonard paused, considering. This was one scary goddamn chick. He looked at the blood streaming down Hobb's face from the gash in his forehead.

"Stay out of it," Hobb told him.

"I got your back," Leonard said.

That surprised the hell out of Hobb, to say the least. "I said stay out of it," he told Leonard.

Reluctantly, Leonard stepped back a little to let Noon know he wanted none of her fury coming his way, but wasn't quite ready to give up on the role of peacemaker. "Look, Noon, if Seaver's dead..." he began.

"Then the fuck-up is in charge," Noon finished for him. She sneered at Hobb. "But not if he can't fuckin' walk or talk."

Hobb wiped blood from his eye. The Operators from Noon's LAV were making their way across the highway, coming to check out the show. One was limping badly—was that Lovinger?—while another was clinging to the shoulder of someone else. How many of *them* wanted to fight him, would rather beat the shit out of him than see him take command of the strike team? Hell, the last thing on Earth Hobb wanted was to lead a bunch of people who hated him on a mission that had already gotten fucked like a five-dollar crack whore.

He stared at Noon. Her body was practically vibrating with the raging desire to stomp a mud hole in his ass. Even disregarding the pain he was already experiencing, he didn't have much enthusiasm for fighting the woman. For starters, he didn't like the idea of hitting a girl—although referring to Noon as such was more than a little ridiculous; she could probably hold her own with Mike Tyson as long as he didn't start biting and maybe even then. But even more than the gentlemanly manners his mom and dad had taught him, he was concerned about getting the stuffing kicked out of him in front of the entire strike team. Not much choice, though. If he were to throw down with Noon and lose, things would be bad enough, but if he were to walk away, let her back him down, whatever miniscule respect the other team members might have had for him would be gone forever. Hobb risked a quick glance at Kelly, who was standing near the wrecked LAV with Hurley. She looked like she was auditioning for Talia Shire's role in the remake of *Rocky*, her face a picture-perfect mask of waifish concern. So taken was he with Kelly's apparent worry, Hobb almost caught Noon's fist in his face a third time. Seeing her movement an instant before the blow could strike, he ducked to the side and she tagged the edge of his helmet instead, still managing to give his neck a painful snap.

Hobb came up in a fighting stance, angling his body towards Noon to provide a narrower target and keeping his fists up in front of his face. The big broad might be an ass-kicking bruiser, but she still had that

pretty, girlish bone structure in her face. Hobb thought that if he could connect with her sculpted cheekbones a couple times, it might make her think twice about things.

Barking out a huff of air, Hobb snapped a quick left at Noon. She twisted, blocking with her right forearm. Hobb followed up with a right, catching the woman in the side, her bulletproof vest absorbing most of the impact. The other members of the strike team had gathered around in a loose circle. Hobb was happy to see that no one had the sack to cheer Noon on, at least.

She swung at him again, her fist coming straight at his goddamn right eye again. Hobb snapped his head back and the blow barely tapped the end of his nose, just enough to light up a flashbulb in his brain and make his eyes water. Unfortunately, it also caused him to sneeze. Just once, but Noon took advantage of it and drove a hard right dead-on into the cut over his right eye. Droplets of blood trailed from her knuckles as she withdrew the fist. Hobb staggered back, wincing in agony. A thick wave of blood poured down from the wound, completely blinding him in that eye. Noon moved in fast, nailing him with a stiff blow in the gut. His vest took the best part of the contact, but the punch still drove a lot of the wind from his lungs. Instantly, another fist buried itself in his left cheek, tossing his head back at a funny angle and sending spit and blood gushing from his mouth. Faces whirled past as Hobb spun around. He came down on his knees, facing towards Kelly.

Girls weren't supposed to hit this hard, were they? What the hell would Townsend think of him if he saw this shit? Or Lauren, for that matter. Shoulda worked in a bank, Hobb thought. Lauren. She'd be home in bed by now, or sprawled on the couch watching an old movie. He wished he had some way to contact her, let her know how much he loved her. And how sorry he was to have taken Jeff up on the offer to join the strike team.

Then Noon's boot caught him in the side, directly under his left arm. Something in there made an extremely unpleasant crunching sound. As Hobb fell, he managed to hook Noon's ankle in the crook of his arm, yanking her off-balance.

"Motherfucker!" she shouted, giving Hobb a little twinge of delight that somehow managed to squirm upwards through all the pain.

Both combatants dropped to the dirt, Noon landing behind Hobb. He quickly rolled towards the woman, driving a fist into her lusciously kissable lips. She yelped in pain and Hobb saw blood on her teeth. Finally. Shoving himself to his feet, he started to swing a heavy boot at her, but was kept in check by his conscience: All right, you punched her in the face, but kicking a woman in the ribs? Shame on you.

Fuck off, buddy, Hobb told the tiny voice, following through with the

kick after all. *It's not your ass she's beating.*

Thanks to Hobb's instant of hesitation, Noon saw the kick coming and was able to roll with the blow. Using her momentum, she snapped up to her feet again, facing off with her new commanding officer. She wiped a knuckle across her swollen, split lower lip, glanced at the blood, then fixed Hobb with a furious gaze, fists clenched in front of her. "Enjoy it," she snarled. "Because that's all you're gonna get."

That's what I'm afraid of, Hobb thought. He flexed his fingers, readying himself. His knuckles cracked loudly. One of his fingers didn't seem to be working properly. Noon came at him and threw a left, the punch coming up short. Hobb went in with a right. The woman ducked her head and his fist connected painfully with the top of her Kevlar helmet. As Hobb drew back, howling in pain, Noon closed the gap between the two and put a brutal right directly into his mouth.

She was already back in her fighting stance and swaggering cockily before Hobb hit the ground. "Yeah, don't feel so good, does it?" she said, snickering.

I could just lie here quietly, Hobb thought, tasting blood as it ran across his tongue. Maybe they'd all get bored after a while, go away and leave me alone. Willing himself to move, he raised up to a sitting position. Blood seeped down his chin. Gingerly, he felt his aching mouth. His upper lip was split wide open, cut by his front teeth, one of which was frightfully loose. As his finger touched the tooth, it dropped from his mouth, landing on his bulletproof vest. He stared at it for a second.

"Aw, *bitch*," Hobb slurred, glowering at Noon. "That was my favorite tooth."

As he pushed himself to his feet, Noon rushed him, slamming a shoulder into his gut and taking him to the ground once again. They hit the dirt in a tangle of wildly flailing limbs, each trying to connect with any kind of blow. No longer able to control their schoolyard-brawl tribal instincts, the other team members immediately crowded around Noon and Hobb, shouting and egging them on.

Hobb was definitely getting the worst of it. Noon had him down on his back and was slamming her little rock-hard girl-knuckles repeatedly into his fucked-up right eye and he was rapidly becoming sick of it. He swung upwards with an left that caught her in the nose, but the punch barely slowed her down. She nailed him in the bad eye with two more blows.

"You fucking idiots!" Hobb heard Kelly scream from the sidelines. He caught a glimpse of her running around, trying to force her way through the onlookers. Another fist pounded Hobb's face. He tried to get an arm up to block, but Noon was out of control, a raging maniac bent on hammering his face into a bloody pulp. No doubt about it, he

was going to go home in a wet sack. Gotta do something drastic, Hobb told himself. It didn't take much to figure out what that was going to be.

While allowing a couple more punches to connect with his battered kisser, Hobb stealthily slipped his left hand inside Noon's bulletproof vest. Gritting his teeth, he cupped the woman's ample right tit in his hand and squeezed as hard as he could, his fingers sinking into the tender but firm flesh. Noon shrieked in pain, cursing and writhing. Instead of giving up, however, she only rained her fists down on Hobb's head even harder than before. And so he squeezed even harder. Noon screamed. The punches slowed. Hobb clenched her breast for all he was worth, his hand quivering violently with the effort. With a high-pitched squeal of distress, Noon flung herself away from Hobb, wrenching her anguished breast from his cruel grasp. Just lifting his tenderized head off the ground took intense effort, but Hobb knew it was now or never.

Forcing himself to his feet, he staggered over to where Noon sat gingerly cupping her sore boob. Grabbing the edges of her helmet on either side of her head, he slammed his knee into her face. Then he did it a second time, just because it seemed like the thing to do. There was also the added bonus that it just plain felt good. Maintaining his grip on her helmet, he stared down at her. She wasn't struggling anymore. Hell, she wasn't even holding her tit anymore. "See what you get for fuckin' with me?" he mumbled.

Hobb looked up from the woman, his one good eye moving across the faces of the strike team members surrounding him. They stared back expectantly, many of them sporting dumbfounded, open-mouthed expressions. Fucking cavemen, he thought. Panting, Hobb pitched Noon's limp form to the ground. Looking at the men around him once again, he peeled his lips back in a bloodstained sneer. "Okay, who's next?"

Their answer took the form of a nervous step back, giving Hobb a little breathing room. Kelly pushed through the crowd, going to Hobb's side. She examined his bloody face, the right eye buried in puffy folds of flesh, the eyelid glued shut with gore. Hobb's tongue darted out to lick his lips. Wavering only a little, he addressed the troops. "Now whip your raggedy asses into shape, because we're goin' back to Camp Crystal Lake."

***

Meredith lay curled on her side in her bunk bed. She wasn't alone in the cabin this time. When they were getting everybody ready for the fight with the soldiers, Mr Rickles had herded all the women and children off to the family cabins to wait. This time, though, Meredith

wished she were alone. She felt weird, like something inside her had curled up and died, and now lay heavily in her stomach. When they first arrived at Camp Crystal Lake, back before she knew how rotten Father Long and his brainless, bleating sheep really were, she had chosen the bottom bunk because it was cave-like and cozy.

Sometimes, in the afternoon when she had finished all her chores, she used to come back here and hang a blanket from the upper bunk, then crawl into her bed and hide in the dark. That was when she'd pretend Kelly was with her, touching her in ways that made her feel almost crazy. Her mom had nearly caught her one time, with her pants pulled down and her fingers moving between her legs, and Meredith thought her heart would stop from fear and excitement—and guilt. What she had been doing was a mortal sin, after all, especially when another girl was the object of her terrible, lustful thoughts. A tear rolled from Meredith's eye, soaking into the pillow that was bunched up beneath her head. She'd never have to worry about her mom catching her being bad again. And Kelly was gone, too. Probably. Maybe not. No. Meredith didn't want to believe it, but she didn't think it was very smart to pretend otherwise. She'd just have to get used to the idea that Kelly was dead, and very soon now her name was going to be Meredith Rickles, assuming she lived long enough for the ex-Marine to collect his little reward.

She sniffled softly, trying to fight the tears. Some of the other people in the cabin had been crying when they were listening to all the guns and the shouting, but not Meredith. She swore she wouldn't cry for any of these people, especially not the ones who were shooting at the soldiers. So she waited. Then, when the gunshots had stopped and nobody was screaming anymore, she cried for her mom and dad. And now she cried for Kelly. And for herself, for the part of her that had died during Father Long's insane sermon in the main cabin, when she had let Mr Rickles hold her close.

Rickles. She hadn't seen him since before the gunfight. He had brought her here and tucked her into bed and kissed her, first on the forehead, but then on the mouth. She had kept her lips pressed tightly together, but Rickles had pushed his fat, wormy tongue between them, smearing it around on the front of her teeth. She knew he wanted to put his tongue deeper into her mouth, but she clenched her jaws together and wouldn't let him, so he just kept rubbing it around against her teeth and sucking at her lips. He tasted the way old bacon grease smelled and when he had left she prayed he'd be killed. Just another sin the Lord could check off next to her name in His big book of Judgment. Maybe Rickles *had* been killed.

Nobody had come to the cabin since the gunfight ended, but she knew the soldiers hadn't won. If they had, they would have rescued her.

Besides, she'd heard voices outside, excited, running around, and she had recognized some of them. Don James and a couple others. But she didn't think she'd heard Rickles. So maybe he was dead. If she was lucky. If God cared about her even one tiny bit. No, don't think like that. Of course God cared about her. But He certainly didn't owe her anything, did He? God helps those who help themselves. Maybe that was the problem: she was waiting for someone to save her.

Meredith sat up in her cave-like bunk, legs folded beneath her, and stared towards the cabin door. She stared towards the cabin door. Could she get away? And where would she go if she could? It was dark out there. She could run fast and Mr Rickles had that bad foot, but he was stronger and sneakier, and she didn't know how far he was willing to go to keep her from getting away from him. It struck her then. I'm more scared of Mr Rickles than I am of Jason Voorhees, she thought. Jason would only *kill* her. Run, girl! Just do it.

She glanced around the room, at the other women waiting for some kind of word of the battle. They looked like mannequins, blank, staring, stupid. Meredith scooted to the edge of her bunk and bent down to retrieve her shoes, where Mr Rickles had pushed them under the bed. Slipping them on, she got up and started for the door.

"Where are you going?"

Meredith froze, gasping softly. She looked to her left, to where Susan Perkins sat in an old rocking chair, tugging obsessively at her right thumb. The woman held Meredith's gaze for a moment, then closed her eyes.

"I... I have to go to the bathroom," Meredith whispered.

Susan Perkins didn't seem to have heard, or to care either way if she had. Meredith took another step towards the door just as it swung open. She felt her belly lurch violently.

Curtis Rickles stood in the doorway. He smiled pleasantly at her. "Comin' to greet your lovin' man at the door?"

She tried to smile, but couldn't be sure it came out that way.

Rickles stepped inside, taking Meredith's hands in his own. His skin was rough and dry. "We won, honey," he said, gazing into her eyes. "We won."

She finally had an answer to her question: she couldn't get away, no matter how hard she tried.

***

Kelly had seen fellas throw down during the course of her distinguished, bar-hopping career, but she could honestly say she'd never seen a fight like the one she'd witnessed tonight in her entire life—and with a woman involved, no less. And that *woman* was one hell of a tough bitch. Kelly grimaced as she mopped blood from the

commando guy's shredded face. His name was Hamm, wasn't it? Like the beer. Still, she didn't want to call him Hamm and find out she was wrong. Then she'd feel like an even bigger idiot. Safer if she just didn't call him anything.

The other one, the fucking Xena-reject broad—she'd done tremendous number on commando guy's face. A real tap dance. She was in pretty rough shape herself and Kelly could tell her boob was killing her, the way she sat around trying to act like she wasn't cradling the tender tit in her arms. But she didn't suffer anything near the damage that the guy had. Except maybe to her ego. The woman didn't seem nearly as smug as she had earlier. The strike team was gathered around the tank that was still upright. Some sat around nursing the wounds they'd suffered, while others kept a watch on the forest to make sure nobody—Jason or Jesus-freak—managed to sneak up on them. *Jesus-freak*. Kelly knew that's what the commandos thought she was, and she hated it.

"Ow," Hobb said calmly, as Kelly took a particularly energetic swipe at his injured face with the towel she held.

"Sorry." Kelly had never been good at playing nursemaid. She leaned back, taking a long look at his swollen, bleeding face. He barely looked human.

He stared back at her. "Is it that bad?"

Kelly considered for a moment. "Yeah," she finally said.

As she moved to dab away another trickle of blood, the medic, Moseley, stepped up, kneeling alongside her. "I can take over now," he said reassuringly.

Kelly smiled at the commando guy. "Thanks," he told her.

She thought he was smiling back, but it might have just been a grimace of pain. Standing, she stepped aside to get out of Moseley's way as the medic went to work. Looking around at the soldiers, Kelly still couldn't quite believe all this was happening. Or, that she had allowed herself to get involved in it. She felt pathetic. "Hey! There's a girl I'm worried about," she blurted to the commando guy. She wished like hell that she could remember his name.

He looked up at her with his one good eye. "There are several people *I'm* worried about. How can you pick just one?"

"Because she doesn't belong there—in the church, I mean. And one of Father Long's... I don't know, sidekicks, I guess, has a thing for her."

"Why is that a problem?"

"She's seventeen.

The tough chick, Noon, spoke up. "That's some fucked-up shit, dude."

"I don't know what kind of church you people are running—" commando guy began.

Kelly cut him off. "It's not my church, I told you that before." She looked away from him, feeling foolish. "I just kind of... fell into it. It was dumb. I was dumb."

"I'll say." He yelped again as the medic applied something to his face. "That shit stings, Moseley."

"The good stuff always does," Moseley said. "Hold still."

Commando guy returned his attention to Kelly. He was actually looking a little better now that he had a real medic working him over. "And just how did you fall in with this particular church?"

Kelly exhaled sharply. "Sin. How else?" She felt the eyes of the entire strike team on her. "A whole lot of sin."

THIRTEEN

The old wooden floorboards of the cafeteria had greedily swallowed up the blood that had been spilled across their surface. Someone had tried to wipe up what they could, but had only succeeded in spreading the stains further. The dark smears were all the evidence that remained of Jason's rampage through the cafeteria. Most of the metal folding chairs were back in place, and the smashed window that Don James had dived through was now shuttered. Even the cross Jason had hung profanely upon was gone.

Morbidly, Meredith glanced around the room, checking shadowy corners and the bases of the walls to see if, perhaps, her dad's eyeball had somehow been left behind. Was it looking at her right now? Where were the bodies, and the pieces of bodies? What would her dad think, seeing her there with Mr Rickles's arm around her? She hoped he wouldn't be happy about the potential husband material, but then again, Father Long had duped her dad and he was even worse. Even more evil. Maybe her parents would have thought Mr Rickles would make a great son-in-law. She tried to force herself to think about something else, but Rickles's touch made that impossible.

Rickles and some of the other men had gathered the congregation from their cabins and led them to the cafeteria. Meredith still refused to call it a church, but that was the name everyone else gave it. As they walked through the dark campground to the big cabin, Rickles had slipped his arm around Meredith and drawn her close. Walking that way, he guided her steps almost like a sheepdog, steering her slightly away from the group and slowing her down to let the others pull ahead somewhat. Not so anyone would notice, of course; after all, that was Mr Rickles's way, but enough for him to have the privacy the night allowed him. Enough that he could slip his hand up under the tail of her shirt without anyone seeing.

Meredith had suffered in silence as he wriggled his fingers into the waistband of her jeans and down into her panties, his fingertips tangling in her pubic hair. "I'll bet it's just as red as the hair on your pretty little head," he had muttered into her ear. Try as he might, Rickles hadn't been able to work his hand far enough into her pants to touch what he wanted, but she knew he'd remedy that before the night was over.

"I want you to sleep in my cabin tonight," he'd whispered to her as they climbed the steps to the cafeteria. "So I can protect you."

She hadn't said anything in response. What was the point? Mr Rickles would get everything he wanted. She was his reward, wasn't she? Standing at the back of the cafeteria, near the door, Meredith counted the people seated in the room. At least a dozen were missing.

All dead? In one night? She wondered how many Jason Voorhees had killed and how many had died fighting the soldiers.

Her eyes fell on Father Long, seated at the head of the room in a big chair she recognized from the main cabin. Don James stood nearby, a rifle slung over his shoulder. Father Long's shirt was off and he was slumped in the chair like a decadent king, a malicious grin on his face. His exposed skin glistened with sweat. Meredith wondered if Kelly had ever seen Long with his shirt off. His torso was lean and wiry, like a racing dog's, and there was a big scar on his belly, probably from having his appendix removed. Would Kelly have thought he looked sexy? Meredith just thought he was disgusting.

"I think we're all here, Curtis," Long said. "Close the door, please." Everyone turned to watch Rickles shut the door. Meredith studied their faces. None of them looked scared. Could they possibly be that stupid, that misguided, that they didn't even fear this man or feel anger at what he had inflicted on them? Rickles rejoined Meredith. He immediately placed his arm around her again, his rough fingers finding their way beneath her shirt to scrape across her belly. She looked up at him and he gave her that toothless smile. She wondered if he mistook her shudder of revulsion for one of pleasure.

Father Long steepled his fingers and contemplated his flock for a long moment. "I thank you all for joining me here in the church tonight," he began, as if anyone had any choice in the matter. "You're probably wondering why I've brought you back here, what with the late hour and all." Speaking loudly, he pitched his voice for the back rows. "The reason we've returned to the church is... well, we're here to celebrate heroes. And to mourn the souls of sinners."

Meredith heard someone, a woman, begin crying, but she couldn't pick her out among the congregation. Was her husband a sinner or a hero?

"Curtis, you're one of those heroes," Long said, gesturing to the ex-Marine. "Please, join us up here."

Rickles beamed proudly at Meredith. She managed a smile in return, losing it as he kissed her cheek. Then, accompanied by a smattering of applause from the congregation, he trotted up the aisle to where Father Long sat. Meredith remained standing at the back of the room, watching as Rickles swapped a handshake with Don James and the two men settled into position on either side of Father Long's makeshift throne. Dedicated lapdogs

The applause continued and finally ceased when Long gestured for quiet. "And let us not forget those heroes who fell in the battle," Long added. "Manny Krenkle..." The applause began again, slowly at first, but building as each name was spoken. "Ronald Shearing... Joseph Bookwalter..." Closing his eyes, Long allowed the applause to go on for

several moments before signaling for silence again. "They died proudly, fighting for what they knew to be true. They died in a manner befitting their role as prophets of a new age." Father Long stood, stretching his arms above his head. Meredith watched the ropy muscles flex along the length of his sweat-drenched torso. Like everything else he did, Long played the movement to his flock, turning a simple stretch into Shakespearean drama. Just like the plays I used to endure in high school, Meredith thought. Only those usually ended with a party for the theatre nerds instead of in mass slaughter.

Concluding the performance with a final little twist of his shoulders, Long somberly faced his followers. "I wish I could tell you that it's over," he said. "That we've won our freedom. But I've told you many times of the fate of prophets throughout history. And you also know that I would never lie to you." He hung his head and trailed his fingers through the sweat on his brow. "They'll be back. The men who would rob us of our faith." Looking up at the congregation again, Long gave them the tiniest of smiles. "I'm sorry. I should stand before you at a time like this, but I'm afraid I'm very weary tonight." He returned to his chair, settling into the seat.

Back to the throne, Meredith thought. Long didn't look weary at all to her; on the contrary, he seemed vibrant and mysterious. Charismatic, that was the word for it. The fatigue was just more of his theatrics, an effort to draw in the crowd. Looking around the room, she could see that it was working. Nearly everyone was leaning forward in their seat, mesmerized by the preacher.

"We're entering a new phase," Long continued. "We can't win the battle, not with guns or grenades or weapons of any kind. Except faith; our faith is our greatest and only weapon."

A chorus of "Amens" went up from the gathered flock.

"We've driven them away for now, but the Lord gave us the element of surprise in that first battle." Smiling, Long gestured to the men on either side of his chair. "The Lord, along with Curtis Rickles and Don James."

Meredith was sickened to hear a few laughs scattered throughout the congregation.

"With the Lord and these two men on our side, we may be able to drive the unbelievers away again. We might be able to keep them at bay for weeks, perhaps even months. Remember Brother Koresh and his followers in Texas all those years ago. But from that incident, we also know they'll keep coming back, with more and more men and more and more weapons until they destroy all of us and every last thing we believe in."

Father Long paused, closing his eyes, leaning back in his chair. He worked his fingers into his brow, then continued. "I don't say these

things to dishearten you, or to weaken your resolve. I say these things to prepare you for what lies ahead. Again I say that I will not lie to you." Still resting his head against the soft back of the chair, Long gazed out at his followers, his eyes dark and severe. "And so we enter a phase of cleansing. It's already begun, with Jason Voorhees—the hand of God—performing His glorious task. Knowing what we face in the days ahead, we must prepare ourselves. All of us must take up arms, both literal and spiritual, against our oppressors if we are to find peace in the Promised Land."

As Long spoke, Meredith found herself staring at Mr Rickles. In several moments the man hadn't looked at her once, his attention instead focused on the congregation. She continued to watch him throughout the pause in Father Long's sermon, as the preacher gathered himself for the next barrage of hideous lies he was spouting.

Mr Rickles paid no attention to her. Could she do it? Slowly, hesitantly, Meredith shifted her right foot, sliding it backwards across the floorboards and towards the door.

Long pushed himself forward in his chair "Those three men who were killed in the battle tonight: Manny, Ronald, Joseph; they left behind beloved wives..."

Meredith heard at least one of those wives sniffle loudly, but kept her eyes glued to Rickles. Still the man didn't look in her direction. Cautiously, she slid her left foot backwards, trying hard to shift the weight of her body without it being obvious.

Father Long stood again, seeking out the wives of the dead men. "Three women who, if they were anywhere else, would be alone now." The preacher smiled lovingly. "But not here. No one is alone in the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel. And tonight, I will take those women to my side and make them my own beloved wives. Guide their spiritual journey through these difficult days."

Rickles's eyes flickered towards Meredith. Of course. All this talk of beloved wives made him want to see his own. She smiled pleasantly at him, even as she carefully continued to inch towards the door.

Long spread his arms wide, offering his cleansing love to the widows he addressed. "Patricia Krenkle. Susanna Bookwalter. Christine Shearing. Please, come to my side. Accept my guidance. Accept my love."

The three women slowly rose to their feet, looking around at one another, unsure. Patricia Krenkle was the first to move towards Father Long, her decision apparently making up the minds of the others. Soon, all three of them were walking up the aisle. And blocking Meredith's view of Rickles. Which means he can't see me, right? Right. If you can't see my mirrors, I can't see you, like the little sign on the rear ends of semi trucks always said. Long's parade of brides had

almost reached him, and Rickles's ugly head kept bobbing into view as the women moved. It was now or never. Holding her breath, Meredith slipped quietly out the door.

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"Say again, strike team," the static-laden voice crackled on at the other end of the radio.

Hobb, with his forehead neatly bandaged, and his right eye once again swollen to hideous proportions, sat in the LAV that Noon and the others had been in. He gripped the radio's microphone, trying to rein in his temper. It was barely working, and with all the static, he might as well have been speaking Swedish. "I said we have six men dead—"

Noon, who was seated on one of the benches in the crew compartment, interrupted. "Seven." Tough girl that she was, she had only been unconscious for a couple of minutes following Hobb's assault on her face. Ever since she'd regained consciousness, she'd been almost tame. She was even allowing Moseley to tend her various wounds, with only the occasional complaint when he'd touch something that was particularly tender.

Hobb released the microphone key. "Fuck," he said. "Who?"

"Howard took a slug during the... On our way back to the LAV," Noon said. She couldn't quite wrap her lips around the word "retreat."

Hobb squeezed the mic's key again. "Correction, that is seven men dead, three wounded—"

"I'm not wounded," Noon said. "You didn't fucking wound me."

Hobb continued speaking into the mic. "We have engaged the target and suffered casualties. In addition, we're facing armed resistance from an estimated twenty-five to forty individuals. We are in need of reinforcements. Repeat, we are in need of reinforcements. Over."

Hobb glanced at Kelly while he waited for a response. She was seated on one of the benches at the front of the crew compartment. She did not want to be too close to the hatch and the darkness beyond. He couldn't really blame her. He heard sporadic clunking from somewhere under the LAV.

Static erupted from the radio as the response came. "Say again, strike team?"

"Jesus," Hobb snarled, tossing the mic down. Standing, he walked to the back of the LAV, staring out at the highway. "You live here," he began, turning to face Kelly. "Isn't there any goddamn traffic on this road?"

Kelly shrugged.

"If one of us could just hitch a ride back to town, make a fuckin' phone call..."

"You just said 'Jesus,' 'goddamn' and 'fuck' to a religious woman,"

Noon said, reprimanding her new commanding officer.

"We've been over this already," Kelly said. "And you know what I have to say about it?"

"Thrill me," Noon said.

"Fuck a bunch of goddamn Jesuses."

Noon cocked a thumb at the floor of the LAV, whistling. "Straight to hell for you."

"I've been on that bus for a long time," Kelly assured the rough woman.

Noon smiled. "I think I'm holdin' a ticket for that ride, myself."

"I'm glad we're all such great fuckin' friends around here," Hobb snapped. He gave the two women a sour look and stomped down the ramp, disappearing around the side of the LAV.

"What's up his rectum?" Noon asked.

"Gee, I dunno," Kelly said. "Maybe you should take a wild fucking guess."

Outside, Hobb walked to the front of the LAV, stopping where a pair of legs protruded from beneath the armored transport. He was beginning to think Noon was easier to tolerate when she was being a complete dick to him. Ever since he'd beat her in the fight, she'd been talkative as hell, and it was getting on his nerves.

He squatted next to the pair of legs. "Any luck?"

"Only bad luck, sir." Chaffin wriggled out from under the vehicle, sitting up. His pudgy face and hands were smeared with grease. "Two of the axles are sheared through. We might be able to drive the beast, but she'd sure as hell put up a fight along the way. Not sure we'd make it very far."

How perfectly typical, Hobb thought. He looked around at the other Operators milling about on the blacktop. Twelve men left—minus Acheson, who was back at the base camp with the one functioning LAV—and two of them were wounded. Lovinger's gunshot wound was fairly minor, or at least as minor as a large caliber chunk of lead punching into your thigh can be. Blair, on the other hand, had lost blood when Jason took a swing at him with that machete. Of course, the bright side of that was that most people didn't meet the big psycho and live to tell about it. Blair, sitting on the pavement and resting against one of the LAV's huge tires, was putting up a good front, but he was pale as a ghost and too weak to be much good to the strike team in the field.

The other men were fidgeting with their weapons and constantly giving anxious looks at Hobb. Hobb was uncertain whether or not he could hold things together, keep the team functioning. Lifting a hand, he prodded carefully at the tender, swollen flesh around his right eye. Noon's rampant pounding had really inflamed it, and he was back to being, to all intents and purposes, blind on that side. He hoped her

breast was puffed up two sizes too big for her bra.

"Sir," Chaffin said, jarring Hobb from his thoughts. He turned to face the stocky Operator. "Do you think one of us should try to walk back to base camp and bring back the other LAV?"

Yeah, let's send someone off to be slaughtered by Jason Voorhees, Hobb pondered for a moment. Maybe they should all hump it back to base camp, try to call for reinforcements from the third LAV. The trouble was, none of the radios had worked for a good goddamn since they'd arrived at Crystal Lake. Some sort of atmospheric shit of some kind, he thought. In any case, if they all made the hike back to base camp, they might find themselves in the same boat they were already drifting in. But at the base camp, they'd be able to pack into the working LAV and get the fuck out. Which was no option at all. Cut-and-run wasn't exactly Hobb's style, and things would have to get a hell of a lot worse before he'd even begin to consider such a tactic. "I don't think that would be safe," Hobb finally answered.

Chaffin studied him for a second. "Excuse me, sir... but what is? I'm willing to volunteer, make the walk myself—"

Hobb cut him off. "I need every able-bodied man with me."

"But if we had the other LAV..."

"That's a half-hour drive going full-tilt boogie in one of these things," Hobb said, cocking a thumb at the damaged LAV. "How long a walk is that gonna be?"

"I can cut through the woods, follow the lake around," Chaffin said.

Hobb stared at him. "You're gonna cut through the fucking woods?"

"Why not? I'm a beefy guy, but I can move when I need to."

Hobb patted him on the shoulder. "With all due respect, Chaffin, I think you're missing the point. No one's going into the goddamn woods by themselves."

Frustrated, Chaffin frowned. He began to say something else, but Hobb interrupted with a gesture. "I appreciate the offer. But what I need you to do is get your gear together and round everyone up for me."

Chaffin gave a sharp nod. "Yes, sir."

Hobb walked to the back of the armored transport, peering into the crew compartment at Samantha Noon and the others. "Noon, we've gotta hat up. I want Lovinger and Blair to stay with the LAV. They can keep trying to raise Acheson on the radio, maybe get us some help."

Noon shoved Moseley aside and stood, moving to follow orders.

Hobb looked at Kelly. "Don't get any ideas. You're staying, too," he told her.

"Not a chance," Kelly said, getting to her feet and starting for the hatch.

Hobb winced. "Don't. Please don't... start, all right? I shouldn't even

have to say the words."

"Then don't." She stood on the ramp, daring him to do something about it.

"It's dangerous out there," Hobb recited as if reading from a script.

"And I was in a room with Jason Voorhees not three hours ago," Kelly said. "I know those people, Hamm..."

"Hobb," he corrected.

A look of embarrassment flashed across her face. "Hobb. Maybe I can help talk sense into some of them." She hesitated. "And I've got to see if Meredith's okay, try to help her get out of there," she added quietly.

"I have concerns for your safety," Hobb muttered, resigned to what he knew was coming.

"Fuck you," Kelly said, stomping past him down the ramp.

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Back at the strike team's base camp, Operator Acheson was packed uncomfortably into the crew compartment of the third LAV, his ass wedged onto a narrow strip of bench. He could barely move, thanks to the metal lock-boxes stacked floor-to-ceiling—hell, he couldn't even put his arms out straight in any direction—and to make matters worse, his foot was giving him fits. Grunting, Acheson struggled to get his foot up on the bench, finally grabbing his ankle and lifting the damn thing by hand. As he went to untie the boot, he gave his elbow a painful crack on one of the lock-boxes.

Fuck it. He didn't have room to change his mind in there, let alone deal with his foot. Besides, he had a shotgun, didn't he? Working himself along the bench, he reached up to slam the heel of his hand into the lock on the rear hatch. He pushed the hatch open, the metal plate dropping into the dirt with a soft thud. Scooting a little further down the bench, Acheson peeked around the side of the LAV. "Yoo hoo, motherfucker," he said softly. He slid off the bench, crouching on the ramp. He winced at the pain in his foot, hissing softly. As the jolt of intense agony eased somewhat, he opened his eyes and looked around. Dark as a nun's ass-crack out there he, thought. Unfortunately, all the night vision goggles were in the other transports. Acheson reached back to grab his shotgun and cocked it. The sound was exceptionally loud and equally satisfying. "Mr Voooooorheeeees," he called quietly to the darkness.

Rising, Acheson limped to the bottom of the ramp and stepped off into the soft dirt. It was pretty spooky standing alone, but at least he could limp without anyone seeing him. It had taken a lot out of him, being so stoic. Nowhere to sit; story of his life. Painfully hopping up the ramp, he grabbed one of the lock-boxes and carried it back down.

Acheson hopped a few paces away from the LAV and set the lock-box on edge, within the circle of light spilling from the crew compartment of the transport.

Then he planted his ass on the box, facing the LAV. With my back to the woods, he thought. Shifting, he worked his way around so he was angled in such a way that the light still fell where he needed it, but he could get a better view of his surroundings. Bending, he began the slow process of unlacing the combat boot. He should have sat this one out. If he'd been smart, he'd be kicked back on the sofa right now with a beer in one hand and a remote in the other, watching B*attlestar Galactica*. Maybe he even could have convinced Gretchen to come over. Sometimes, when he was sick, she'd give him a blowjob. Boy, could he use one of those right about now. It was such a pathetic injury, though. He never would have lived it down if the other Operators had found out about it. That's why he'd done such a manly job of keeping it secret, even though his foot was constantly throbbing and sending stabbing pains up his leg. Acheson pulled the laces loose all the way down the boot, trying to give his foot as much room as possible before he slipped the boot off. Oh man, is this gonna hurt, he thought. Gritting his teeth, he took hold of the boot and pulled it off slowly. As his toes scraped along the leather, he stifled a howl. When the boot was off, he hurled it aside, never wanting to lay eyes on it again.

Breathing hard, he examined his sock. The stink made his lip curl. It looked like someone had injected Crisco and chicken blood into his sock. Acheson figured the real damage had been done when he ran down to the water's edge with Ortega and Hurley, to see what was going on at Camp Crystal Lake. He'd had to fight to keep from screaming then, but he felt like he'd put on a pretty good show, under the circumstances. Real Academy Award material. Huffing a few times as he worked to screw up his courage, Acheson began peeling the sock down. It was fine until he got it over his heel. Then he realized it was glued to the wound with blood and pus. Gagging, he looked around, not quite sure what he was looking for. Help, he guessed. He needed to get the sock loose.

The lake.

It was a long hop down to the water, but he couldn't see any other way. Using his shotgun as a brace, Acheson shoved himself up onto his uninjured foot. Steeling himself, he started hopping. Acheson had been doing wheelies on a bike he borrowed from a kid who lived down the block. And he had been barefoot and a little drunk. But when he settled his ass down on that old-school banana seat and leaned back against the sissy bar, he just couldn't help himself. He started popping wheelies and riding them around, just like when he was a little kid, and he'd be happy to tell anyone who wanted to listen that he still had the

old magic. Okay, so he couldn't figure out how he had managed to jam his toes into the spokes of the back wheel, but it hurt. The skin was shredded like he'd used a cheese grater on it and two of the toenails had peeled off immediately, while the others were slowly lifting away from the toes of their own accord. Acheson figured he'd seen worse, and so didn't bother going to the doctor. The infection had taken hold pretty quickly.

He paused, leaning against a tree, and looked back towards the LAV. He was making good time and the transport was already a good distance behind him. Of course, so was the light. He peered into the dark woods, looking for movement. "Jason? You out there, buddy?"

Silence. Then he heard a loud crack. Acheson jumped, bringing his shotgun up. Somewhere up in the treetops, something thumped. Leaves rustled. Acheson relaxed. A broken branch was making its way down from above. He watched it fall the last dozen feet or so to the ground, as it bounced off a lower limb and thudded into the dirt. Jason doesn't climb trees, he thought. Breathing again, Acheson went back to hopping. Reaching the loose sand near the water's edge, he lost his balance and fell, jamming his injured foot into the dirt. He let out a short cry of pain, biting it off.

Cursing through clenched teeth, he rolled onto his back and grabbed his ankle, lying there until the pain eased enough for him to move. He stared up at the sky. Fuck, what's going on, he wondered. Why hasn't anyone bothered to radio in and give me the goddamn poop? Oh yeah. Radio doesn't work. Whose idea was this piece-of-shit clusterfuck, anyway? Acheson felt like he might enjoy watching them eat his pus-soaked, smelly sock, if he could ever get it off his nasty-ass foot. Carefully shielding his foot, he sat up and looked out across the lake. There were a few lights burning at Camp Crystal Lake, but no sign of any activity.

Pushing himself to his feet, Acheson hopped the rest of the way to the water and plopped down on his ass at its edge. Tiny waves lapped gently at his legs. The water was cold and he was beginning to have second thoughts. How many parasites and deadly organisms are going to crawl up inside of me when I do this? He shrugged the idea away. Anything was better than hopping around with his sock glued to his crusty toes. Holding his breath, he plunged his foot into the water, his butt cheeks clenching at the sudden chill. Then he noticed his shotgun lying next to him, the waves washing over it. "Damn it," he hissed, grabbing the gun and tossing it a few feet farther up the bank, out of the water's reach.

Returning his attention to his foot, Acheson lifted the loose part of his sock and tugged gently. Still stuck. He wiggled his toes; he wasn't quite sure he could actually feel them anymore, but he assumed, if they

still hurt as bad as they did, that they couldn't be dead yet. He swished his foot around, continuing to pull at his sock. The fabric slowly began to lift away from the pus and blood. Grimacing, he peeled the sock loose and flung it aside, then leaned in close to examine it. Three of his toenails were entirely gone. The nail on his big toe clung to the piggy by a tiny strand of pasty-white flesh, thick yellowish crud collecting around it. The little toenail was loose; with his index finger, Acheson lifted it back carefully, revealing the bruised and bloated meat underneath.

All five of his toes and the top of his foot were ragged and ill-looking, the skin torn up and mottled with various shades of bruise—purple and black. It looked like he had spread a layer of ground beef across the surface of his foot and it had gone bad days ago. Acheson's stomach turned. The tell-tale streaks of infection ran from the wound, up his ankle like lines on a road map. He was going to have to bite the bullet and show it to Moseley when the strike team came back, and see if the guy could give him some antibiotics. Daintily, Acheson grabbed the loose nail on his big toe and tugged at it to test the strength of the skin that held it on. The toenail came away like nothing and he held it up to his face, turning it this way and that to check it out. It was yellow and ridged, like it came from an old man, and there was a coating of cheese-like, white goop on its underside. No wonder Gretchen would never agree to suck his toes, he thought. Letting out a snort of disgust, he flicked the nail away, out into Crystal Lake. It hit the water and floated for a second before a dark shape broke the surface, splashed once, and was gone, taking the toenail with it.

A fish, Acheson realized. Goddamn fish ate my toenail. Then he stared at his foot resting beneath the rippling surface of the lake, the water lapping around his ankle. The torn strips of skin and meat waggled in the current just like worms on a hook. Acheson quickly yanked his foot from the water and scooted back on the bank. He'd once seen a television show about some primitive people who treated infected limbs by submerging them in a river and allowing the fish to eat the rotten parts away, but Acheson was a firm believer in modern medicine. No goddamn trout is gonna nibble my nasty toes, he thought.

He heard a loud *crack* from somewhere behind. Acheson whipped his head around. He stared wide-eyed over his shoulder, into the dark woods. Another dead tree branch? He waited for a few moments, expecting to hear the branch falling through the trees. Nothing. Just the gentle lapping of the waves. No, scratch that. Something was moving out there, just beyond the tree line. Keeping his eyes on the woods, Acheson reached for his shotgun, but came up with nothing but wet sand. He glanced around, feeling anxous. He spun, searching the

darkness around him. His gaze fell on the shotgun, which looked like nothing more than a tree branch. It was about five yards away from Acheson, where'd he'd flung it up on the bank to keep it out of the water. There was another sound from the trees. Acheson's breath caught in his throat. If it wasn't for the pale moonlight filtering through the trees, reflecting off the filthy white hockey mask, he might not have recognized the dark shape as Jason Voorhees. Although the machete gripped in the lunatic's right hand was a pretty good indicator.

Acheson shoved himself upright, nearly shrieking as his weight came down on his injured foot. Half running, half crawling, he scurried up the bank to where his shotgun lay in the sand. Jason stepped from the tree line, striding towards him, casually raising his machete. On his hands and knees, Acheson snatched up his shotgun and whirled towards the approaching killer. His bad foot scraped across the sand, peeling rotten flesh from the wound. Howling in agony, Acheson pulled the trigger. The buckshot peppered Jason's left shoulder and neck, a few pellets punching small round holes in his mask. His head and upper body snapped back under the impact. The hulking maniac staggered a little, then steadied, focusing on his prey once again. Acheson, the throbbing pain in his tortured foot bringing tears, stared into the yellow eyes that peered at him from within the hockey mask. The LAV. He had to make it to the LAV. Lock himself in there and see how the psycho liked having a few inches of armor plate between him and his intended victim. Acheson's finger squeezed the trigger again. The shotgun spat flame and ripped into Jason's gut, shredding his moldering shirt and the flesh beneath. The madman reeled backwards, but stayed on his feet, which was more than Acheson could do. The instant he fired the round, he pushed himself up and tried to run, but his wounded foot sent spikes of pain slamming up his leg and he tumbled to the ground again, gasping. The shotgun slipped from his grasp, skidding away in the sand.

Acheson looked in terror towards Jason.

The machete-wielding murderer was examining his newest shotgun wound curiously, his head slowly tilting back and forth. Thick black blood spilled from the torn flesh, dribbling down his front.

Run your ass off, Acheson thought. NOW! Snarling with the effort, he heaved himself upright again. With his bad foot raised behind him, he started hopping towards the trees and the strike team's base camp. Jason Voorhees looked up, his grip tightening on the handle of his machete as he saw the prey trying to escape. Acheson reached the tree line, wobbling crazily with every hop, his arms pinwheeling at his sides. It was never going to work, he couldn't balance and his footing was becoming more treacherous. He risked a glance back over his shoulder.

Jason was closing in on him. That big bitch is just walking, that's all,

he thought. Like he's out for a Sunday stroll. The killer was narrowing the gap between himself and Acheson as if the Operator weren't even moving. Acheson saw the machete blade rise. His bad foot came down hard. His knee weakened as a volcanic eruption of pure agony surged upwards through his leg, but he somehow stayed on his feet. The pain tore through his body, screaming upwards until it rattled around the inside of his skull and pressed against the back of his eyeballs. Jason was only a few feet behind him now. Acheson's bad foot slammed into the ground again, this time coming down on a dead tree branch. Something sharp entered the flesh on the bottom of his foot. His vision darkened for an instant and he nearly fell, slowing for only a moment. Then, he could see the LAV just a dozen yards away.

Jason swung the machete.

The blade entered the left side of Acheson's torso between the fifth and sixth ribs, shattering one of them and sinking into the lung, Fire tore through his chest as the wind went out of him. Acheson pitched forward, his sudden movement yanking the machete from Jason's grip. The blade, however, remained lodged between Acheson's ribs as he tumbled face-first to the ground. The tip of the machete dug a trough in the dirt, jamming the blade deeper into Acheson's chest and ripping a wider gash in his collapsed lung. Through all the pain in his torso, Acheson could still feel the stick that had punctured his right foot, like a barnacle on the Titanic.

Wheezing quietly as he sucked in a breath, Acheson stared ahead at the LAV. Agonizing pain wrenched his upper body as he reached forward with his left hand, clutching at the ground. Pushing up with the same hand, and shoving with his feet, he tried to crawl towards the transport. The machete blade gouged further into the dirt, twisting and scraping against his shattered ribs and forcing a whispery scream from Acheson's wrecked insides. He could hear Jason Voorhees coming up behind him. Don't look back, he thought. Don't look back.

He looked back.

Jason stepped up next to him, pausing to gaze down at Acheson's writhing body. Acheson tried to crawl again, but the machete tore deeper into his chest and he felt something come loose in there. Lying with the right side of his face pressed into the dirt and leaves, he could feel the blood pooling beneath him. He noticed his boot resting in the dirt nearby, where he had tossed it earlier. Jason bent over him, gripping the handle of the machete. A long, painful gasp hissed from between Acheson's clenched teeth as the killer slowly tugged the blade free, the metal sliding across bone with a dull scraping sound. Acheson merely lay there for an excruciatingly long moment, waiting for the blade to strike again.

Then the machete dropped to the dirt next to him.

He stared at his own blood, which trickled down the blade. Then, he twisted his head to look up at Jason Voorhees standing over him. Unmoving except for a slow, repetitive clenching of his thick, decayed fingers, the maniac stood there gazing down at his victim. He's just gonna watch me die, Acheson thought. He stared into the waxy yellow eyes that burned nebulously from the hockey mask's eye slits. No. No way. Straining, Acheson made another torturous, determined effort to crawl towards the LAV. If he was going to bleed to death, it was going to be while trying to make it to that goddamn transport and not just lying at the feet of Jason. But it was getting harder for him to draw breath. Acheson wondered if he might be drowning in his own blood. He had crawled for a distance of about nine inches when Jason leaned over him. The killer's massive right hand closed over Acheson's left arm, just below the shoulder. Acheson's mouth fell open as if to scream as Jason roughly yanked him upwards, but nothing came out. The lower half of his body remained on the ground.

Holding him like that, Jason groped Acheson's side with his left hand, his fingers burrowing into the machete wound. Acheson groaned horribly as Jason's fingers forced their way between the ribs there, digging deeper and deeper into the wound. With his fingers wedged firmly between the bones, Jason took a grip on Acheson's rib cage and tightened his hold on the man's upper arm. Effortlessly, the immense madman hoisted Acheson skywards, holding the wriggling body over his head like King Kong Bundy about to deliver a punishing body slam. Acheson shrieked in horrified torment as Jason slowly began pulling his torso apart, as if splitting lobster to get at the meat. Bones splintered and cracked. Acheson felt his ribs separate from his sternum, heard something meaty and wet splatter on the ground beneath him. When Acheson stopped struggling, Jason dropped the limp body into the dirt. The killer stared down at the corpse for a moment, then shook the entrails from his shoes, retrieved his machete and disappeared into the forest.

***

The girl had run out on him. Rickles hadn't seen her leave the church because those three women had been blocking his view, but when the broads had reached the altar and were out of his damn way, he saw that Meredith was gone. At first he had thought she might have just taken a seat, but it only took a moment's glancing around the large room to see that that wasn't the case. The bitch has left me... Well now, wait just a second, a little voice in his head admonished him. That's no way to refer to the future mother of your children, asshole. And if he was going to make things work with Meredith, he needed to avoid being an asshole. The girl had been through a hell of a lot, and what

she needed now was a whole lot of sweetness. Rickles figured he had plenty of that to offer. Of course, he'd have to find the girl first. Then he'd be so sweet to her, she wouldn't know what hit her.

Rickles was seated on the edge of his bed in the main cabin. One of the windows was blown out when that grenade had gone off right outside during the gun battle, and the curtains were waving in the gentle breeze. The night air was a comfort to him. The machete wound on his arm hurt like hell and the throbbing pain was making him feel hot. He eyed his bandaged forearm. The blood had almost completely soaked the gauze strips, but it seemed to have stopped, at least. He flexed his fingers, counting himself lucky that the blade hadn't severed anything too important. The breeze shifted slightly, carrying a pungent odor to Rickles's nostrils. He looked around the room, his eyes falling on his piss-soaked jeans.

Rickles stood up, crossed the room and picked up the moist pair of trousers delicately between two fingers. He couldn't believe he'd pissed his pants when Jason Voorhees was after him, swinging that machete and staring at him with those cold, yellow eyes. He walked to the window and hurled the jeans out, listening to them hit the ground with a soft thump. Then, he leaned against the windowsill and peered out into the night. As mad as he was at the girl for running off like she had, truth be known, he was worried sick about her being out there alone in the dark. She might have too much sin in her; she wouldn't escape Jason's judgment like he had. Especially considering the disrespectful way she'd spoken to Father Long earlier. That alone was probably enough to send her spiraling into the black depths. Still, he couldn't understand why the good father wouldn't let him go out and search for the girl. She just needed some proper attention to set her back on the straight and narrow once again, bring her back to being the God-fearing youngster she was before the night's events had swayed her.

Rickles turned away from the window as something thumped against the wall that joined his room with Father Long's. He smiled knowingly. The father was in there with the widows—his new brides—making certain their grief didn't cause them to stray from the righteous path. It was exactly the kind of attention Meredith needed to get her back on track. Rickles wished the girl was alone in his room with him right then, he figured he could have thrust the love of Jesus into her for all he was worth. Sighing, he went back to the bed and picked up his hunting rifle. He still couldn't understand why she'd run off, especially when she seemed to be warming up to him earlier. Kissing him like she had before he went off to fight, and then teasing him into slipping his hand down her pants and feeling that little muffin of hers. Damn, but that had been sweet. His dick had gotten so hard, he'd barely been able to walk along next to her. Without thinking about it, he lifted his hand

to his face and sniffed his fingers. He hadn't actually sunk any of his digits into her, but he could smell her. And Lord knew, Curtis Rickles had nothing but appreciation for a girl who perfumed her panties, that was for certain. He let his fingers trail across his lips, imagining what the girl's fragrance would be like when he finally got a chance to drink from the furry cup.

Suddenly, Rickles dropped to his knees alongside his bed and bent forward, his hands clasped in prayer. "Dear Lord," he whispered softly. "I do understand that she's been bad, but please don't bring Meredith up for judgment at the hands of your righteous vessel—not till I've had a chance to bring her back to the fold. Just give me my chance to make things right, that's all I'm asking. Amen."

With his hands still clasped in front of his face, Rickles sniffed once again at Meredith's scent adorning his fingertips. And just give me my chance to taste that naughty nectar, Lord. He knew he could set that girl straight, given one night alone with her. He stood, tugged his pants out from around the bulge between his legs, and picked up his hunting rifle from the bed. He had a patrol to make, and he thought he just might wander off a little at the same time, see if he couldn't find his bride-to-be. As he left his room, Rickles was surprised to find Don James standing in the hallway, a nervous expression on his face. "What are you doing out here, Don?" Rickles asked quietly. "Waitin' on a bus?"

"Business," Don whispered, flicking his tongue out to wet his dry lips. "I need to discuss something with Father Long."

Rickles sized him up. The man was definitely on edge about something. "Looks to me like you're loitering. Why don't you go on downstairs and wait till the father comes down? You know he's busy right now, he doesn't need to be disturbed."

"I think I'll just wait here." Don leaned back against the wall, dredging up his prison-yard cool from down deep, his suddenly-cold eyes daring Rickles to try him.

As much as Rickles would have liked to take the man up on his offer, the congregation didn't need to be fighting amongst themselves at a time like this. "All right then," Rickles said, nodding. Shutting his bedroom door behind him, the ex-Marine quietly went down the stairs and out into the night.

FOURTEEN

Meredith stared out across the cold surface of Crystal Lake, watching the way the sparse moonlight reflected on the rippling water. It reminded her of those moving waterfall pictures they sold at the little gift shop in the mall. She had always wanted one of those so she could hang it over her bed and stare at it at night when the lights were out, but they were too expensive, even when the store put them on sale for Christmas. They were beautiful, though. Somehow, Meredith thought, the real thing didn't seem as pretty.

When she slipped out of the cafeteria, she had run and run until she thought her lungs would explode. It didn't matter that she had nowhere to go; she just knew she had to leave the campground, get away from Mr Rickles and Father Long and all the rest of them. Meredith knew she was a sinner, but they were the last people she wanted to hear it from. Besides, they weren't exactly in a position to throw stones, from what she could see. Of course, she had hoped she might find Kelly out there, if she were still alive. But then, Kelly would probably be miles away by now, maybe all the way back to town. Maybe she was trying to get help right now.

If she was still alive.

At first, Meredith had considered trying to run back to town, but the thought that Rickles would probably expect her to do that had brought her up short. She didn't want to make it easy for the creepy old man to find her. But he would never expect her to run off into the forest—not with Jason Voorhees out there. So that's exactly what she had done. Meredith shuddered, still able to feel the touch of his ragged, callused hands on her belly and down the front of her pants. The idea of what he would've done to her if she hadn't run away made her sick to her stomach.

She heard a weird sound from the woods. She turned to look, not really caring what it was, as long as it wasn't Mr Rickles out looking for her. She feared Jason because of the depth of her sin, but she knew Rickles would only make her more unclean. That's all. Squirrels.

She smiled at the memory of Kelly, only to have a sudden wave of despair wash over her. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She just wanted to be a normal girl, be back at home, sneaking peeks at MTV whenever her parents weren't around. Her heart sank even further as it occurred to her that she could watch all the MTV she wanted to. Her parents would never be around again.

Gazing into the dark woods, Meredith tried remember some of the stories she'd heard about Jason Voorhees. Father Long, for everything else that was screwed-up in his head, had at least gotten one thing right: Jason only killed sinners. People who used drugs and had sex out

of wedlock. She hadn't done either one of those things, but she was certainly overflowing with lust, and the worst kind imaginable. You don't fantasize about lying with another girl and still talk your way into Heaven. Yeah, right: she was a normal girl—as normal as a sexual deviant can be. It might not be too late for her, though. She had never actually done the deed. Although she had touched herself plenty of times while thinking about it, and that was pretty bad. But if she tried hard, maybe she could still earn forgiveness from the Lord.

All she had to do was pass judgment, after all. Meredith turned around to look at Crystal Lake again. A gentle breeze blew across the water, setting the surface of the lake to shimmering under the moonlight. Just like the pictures at the mall. She was wrong; it was beautiful, even with the murders. She didn't like to think about people dying, especially not her mom and dad. But if it was the Lord's will, then how could it be anything but beautiful? She thought that she was starting to sound like Father Long. Maybe she was crazy. Or maybe he wasn't. Frustrated, Meredith dropped to her knees on the water's edge. She dug her fingers into the wet sand, scooping up handfuls and letting it fall again. Why was it all so confusing? Everything was so messed up, starting with why she felt the way she did about Kelly. Why would God do that to her, make her feel that way, if it was so wrong? Unless it was a test. Maybe He did it to everybody. Maybe she just had to make herself not like Kelly in that way, not want to hold her and touch her and kiss her...

Bad. She was being bad again, letting her dirty thoughts run away with her.

Meredith clenched her fists tightly, squeezing the handfuls of sand she held into hard little clumps. She had to let the word out, the word she never wanted to say or even think. Maybe that would help make it go away. "Lesbian," she whispered. She felt a cold sting in her mouth, like touching her tongue to a battery. How could one little word encompass so much guilt? It even scared Kelly. Maybe not the word itself, but when Meredith had touched her the day before (had it only been the day before?) she had definitely been freaked out. And Meredith was pretty sure that Kelly had done practically everything, at least all the stuff you would for sure get sent to hell for doing.

Dropping the handfuls of packed sand, Meredith stared at the ground for a moment. Then, with her index finger, she reached out and wrote the word in the sand in front of her. It was okay, because the water would erase it and no one would ever know. The water of Crystal Lake would wash it away, and, if she was lucky, take her sin along with it. Meredith cocked her head and read the word over and over again, until it didn't even seem like a word anymore. I have lust in my heart for Kelly Mills, she confessed to herself. Say it out loud. She was going

to have to say it out loud or it wouldn't go away. "I have... I have lust in my heart for Kelly Mills," Meredith whispered, so softly that she almost made no sound at all.

Her heart pounded in her chest. "I have lust in my heart for Kelly Mills," she repeated, louder this time, the sound of her own voice sending a chill up her spine. If it was lust for a boy would it still be a sin? Or could she pretend it wasn't lust, then? Just puppy love or a crush or something? God would still know it was lust. So why was feeling it for another girl so much worse? It was the same emotion, the same sin. God knew about it either way, so why did it anger Him more if it was directed at a girl? Meredith read the word in the sand again. Lesbian. Lesbian.

Her parents were normal: a man and a woman, just as God intended it to be. Then why did they have to die? Her mom and dad were normal and they loved and feared their God and they still died. Angrily, Meredith clawed at the sand, wiping the word away. Then it struck her. How could her parents be normal if they had given birth to her? That had to be the answer. Her mom and dad had suffered for her sins, died for her sins. Which made her sins all the more consuming. The word wouldn't stop coming now, now that she'd let it out. Lesbian. Lesbian.

Sinner.

She willed herself to say it out loud. "Lesbian," Meredith muttered. It was like a snake crawling out of her mouth. She had sinned with her perversion and her lustful thoughts and her masturbation, and her parents had died because of it, because of her. Tears spilled from her eyes. She had to offer herself up for judgment if there was to be any hope for her immortal soul. Had her sins damned her parents to eternal torment?

Meredith stood up and looked out across God's creation—the water, the earth, the sky—and sobbed violently, her body shuddering. Slowly, she reached up and began unbuttoning her blouse, her fingers trembling so badly she could barely perform the task. Unfastening the last button, she peeled her shirt off and cast it aside. Then, reaching back, she undid the catch on her bra and removed the undergarment, dropping it to the ground. Her nipples hardened painfully under the cool breeze, but she resisted the temptation to fold her arms protectively across her breasts.

Lesbian. Sinner.

Meredith kicked off her shoes and bent to remove her socks. They joined her bra and blouse in the pile. Unzipping her jeans, she slowly pushed them down, stepping out of them and laying them with the rest of her clothes. Weeping softly, Meredith stared straight ahead as she removed her panties and tossed them away. She stood naked before the Lord. "I have lust in my heart," she said, sniffling. Kneeling once again,

she said a quiet prayer, asking God to forgive her sins. Then, wiping the tears from her face, she stood and turned towards the shadowy forest. "Jason?" she whispered. "Jason... I'm ready to face your judgment now."

***

The strike team moved vigilantly through the woods, despite their distance from Camp Crystal Lake. Besides the potential threat of ambush from the religious freaks, Hobb knew that Jason Voorhees could spring out like a murderous, machete-wielding jack-in-the-box at any second. Ah, the beauty of nature. Hobb was learning very quickly just how much he hated the woods. Not to mention people. He sighed. More and more, he found himself wishing he had listened to Lauren and given up the Agency. Since they'd planned to force him out, he probably could have collected a fat unemployment check until his banged-up eyeball healed, then found some kind of quiet job working at a record store. Except he hated rap music even more than he hated the woods, hated people, and he'd probably get stuck working someplace where that was all they played. How come nobody listened to the Kinks anymore? Or Sweet? Hobb loved Sweet, especially *Fox on the Run*. The only time he'd taken up the mic on Karaoke night at the bowling alley, he'd belted out a drunkenly beautiful version of *Fox on the Run* that had the audience shrieking like he was all four of the Beatles. You can bet your ass he wouldn't have gotten a reaction like that if he'd been singing some piece of shit by Ja Rule or someone.

And on top of everything else, with the delicate tap dance Samantha Noon had done on his face, he wasn't sure his eyeball would ever heal. Hobb prodded cautiously at the bulging flesh around his right eye. He had opted not to use his night vision goggles, since his face was so badly swollen and he could only see out of one eye anyway. He figured he'd rely on the rest of the team to see shit that needed shooting. At least he was alive.

If it were possible, Hobb's mood darkened even further. Lauren was going to be demolished when he told her Jeff Townsend had been killed. She had adored Townsend. The man was like a particularly large big brother to her. Hobb's guts twisted themselves up in a throbbing knot of despondency. He'd worked hard to stay focused on the mission, but now the realization that he would never sit down for a beer, or shoot another painfully one-sided game of basketball with the big man was really cutting into him. Townsend was gone, a ghost. And Hobb had been sitting on his ass in an armor-plated troop transport when it happened.

Looking around at the other members of the strike team, Hobb tried to put his mind back to the situation at hand, shake away the

melancholy. That shit gets people killed, he thought. Noon was on point and Garb brought up the rear, the other Operators spreading out, leap-frogging as they moved through the trees. Kelly was sticking close to Hobb, to the point where, a couple of times already, her feet had wound up under his as he was trying to walk. She talked a big story, but Hobb could easily see she was scared shitless. Her eyes darted around in the darkness, jumping at every sound. He had offered her the use of his night vision goggles, but she said that she didn't want to see things that clearly. Considering what she had been through, he couldn't really blame her. He had a laundry list of questions he wanted to ask the woman, but it would be a dumb move to start chattering away—not only would the sound give away their position, but it would be easy to get distracted by the conversation and get caught with their pants down.

He glanced at Kelly. If he was gonna get caught with his pants down, Hobb could think of a lot worse people to have it happen with. She was really something—no Lauren, of course, and no way was he considering for even a moment the possibility of cheating on his wife, but he wasn't a dead man, either. The religious chick was stacked to the gills, no two ways about it, and it certainly didn't hurt to appreciate the view. And he wasn't all that convinced about where she stood in the eyes of the Lord, anyway. She could swear like a sailor, and, from some of the things she had said earlier, he got the impression that she thought a lot of the other folks in her congregation of loonies were, well... exactly that. Yessir, a lot of questions, indeed.

At the front of the team, Samantha Noon paused near a large tree and signaled to Marr. The man hustled forward, taking the point position as Noon fell back alongside Hobb.

"Through the trees there—two o'clock," she whispered, pointing off in the darkness. They continued walking as they spoke, keeping pace with the team.

Hobb and Kelly followed the line of her arm but saw nothing. "No night vision, remember?" Hobb asked, tapping his temple above his inflated eye socket. He winced at the pain, feeling stupid.

Noon grinned at him behind her bulky night vision goggles. "Right." She nodded in the direction she'd pointed. "That's where Jason Voorhees jumped our shit."

With the slightest whistle, Hobb halted the team. The Operators scanned the night expectantly, searching for trouble. Hobb gave them the nod, easing their nerves, and turned to Noon. "That's where Seaver bought... was killed?" Hobb felt his face redden. Seaver was a douche bag of the highest order, but he didn't deserve to be hacked up like a Thanksgiving turkey—and Samantha Noon sure as hell didn't deserve to witness it.

"Yeah," she said, her face tight. "That's where he bought it."

Hobb stared into the cold black lenses of her goggles. "I'll make sure you get your shot."

"Do that."

Giving the woman a quick nod, Hobb looked off into the darkness on their left. "How far are we from the lake here?"

"Not sure," Noon answered. "Road's off to our left, maybe half a klick —"

"What's half a klick?" Kelly interrupted.

Noon's goggles slowly tilted so she could gaze at Kelly. "About fifteen hundred feet."

"I don't think the road's that far," Kelly answered. "I've been trying to figure it in my head while we've been walking—counting it off, kind of."

"All right, Miss Human Computer—what do you come up with?" Noon challenged.

Kelly glanced shyly at Hobb. "Well, I'm not sure exactly."

"Then why are we discussing it?" Noon asked.

"I think it's more like... a quarter of a mile. At least where we're at now. But the road curves down towards the lake and then sort of follows that until it comes to the Ministry... to Camp Crystal Lake." She looked at Hobb. "So... if we keep going the way we are now, we'll wind up farther from it before we come back to it. Does that make sense?"

"Give me a minute," Hobb said. *Jesus*. He might as well have asked her all those questions that were eating at him. If there was anybody around to hear, whoever it was would be on their trail by now. Unconsciously, Hobb glanced around. The tree cover really kept the moonlight to a minimum; he could barely see ten feet in any direction. Anybody could be out there watching them. "I think we should head back towards the road, follow it until we can see the lake. Otherwise we're liable to lose our bearings out here, wind up overshooting the campground, or worse yet, stumble right into it."

Noon shook her head. "They could have the God squad stationed all along that road, just waiting for us—"

"Then that'll give us somebody to shoot at," Hobb said, putting an end to the discussion. "Besides," he said, trying to wink at Kelly, but realizing he was just blinking his one good eye, "it's only a quarter of a klick away. Are you afraid of a little hump?"

"Fuck," Noon replied.

"I want to see Seaver's body," Hobb said. "Then we'll get a move on."

***

Kelly liked this soldier guy. Hobb. Not like the beer, after all. She couldn't believe she was out here in the goddamn woods with him and his buddies heading back to Camp Crystal Lake, but she did like him.

What had he called himself—an Operator? Yeah, I'll bet he's an Operator, she thought. If you positioned yourself so you couldn't see that creepy eye of his, he was a damn fine-lookin' fella. A little short, maybe. No, she told herself. She didn't like him in that way—he just seemed like a good guy, a straight shooter Which is exactly what she thought about Father Eric Long, until recent events altered her opinion. With her track record where men were concerned, maybe she should start dating Meredith. Just give the kid a couple of years before they went all the way, so she didn't buy herself a jail sentence to go along with the carpet-munching. Aw, Meredith, she thought, I hope to Christ you're okay.

Kelly felt like her heart had been clamped in a very large fist ever since she ran away from the old-fashioned revival meeting, and the God-sanctioned Jason Voorhees bloodbath earlier that night. She should have grabbed the girl, dragged her out of there kicking and screaming if she'd had to. Now she just hoped they'd find her before it was too late. Kelly followed Operator Hobb, trying not to stare at his ass in an attempt to figure out what it looked like beneath his unflattering black fatigues, as the team marched off towards their fallen buddy. For some reason she couldn't fathom, the commandos, or Operators, or whatever they wanted to call themselves, felt the need to go look at a guy they already knew was dead, and just about the last thing Kelly wanted to see was someone who had been chopped up by Jason Voorhees. But she sure as hell wasn't going to hang back, alone in the dark forest, while the others went off to look at the butchery. So she went along, practically clinging to Hobb's arm and feeling a little bit embarrassed about it. As they moved into a small clearing, Kelly could make out a frightening shape sprawled on the ground.

"Fuck!" Noon shouted, bending suddenly and snatching up a rock or stick and hurling it towards the corpse.

Kelly saw something scurry away from the body and disappear into the darkness. She forgot the others had those night vision goggles and could see a hell of a lot better than she could. She was glad she hadn't accepted a pair when Hobb had offered.

"Fucking raccoon," Noon said, turning towards Hobb. "It was eating his goddamn face."

Kelly winced. The horror she'd experienced came flooding back all at once, pounding against her like an angry crowd storming a building. She suddenly wanted very much to curl up on the ground and cover her head.

"Hey," Hobb said softly.

Tearing her gaze away from the shape on the ground,

Kelly looked at the Operator. Smiling, he nodded to her, indicating her tight grip on the sleeve of his coveralls. "Oh," Kelly said, feeling

foolish. He wanted to go to the body and she'd been clinging so tightly to him he couldn't get away. Just like every relationship she'd ever had, really. Clingy Kelly. She let go and watched Hobb walk towards the corpse, kneeling alongside it. He quickly averted his gaze, looking like he might throw up.

"Holy Jesus," Hobb muttered, putting his fist to his mouth. Staring at the ground, he addressed Noon. "Did you get his gear—grenades, ammo?" Then he threw up.

Off to Kelly's left, Sisson suddenly let fly with a torrential stream of sympathy puke. He leaned forward, putting his hands on his knees, and spat a couple of times. "Sorry," he mumbled, not looking at the others. "It always happens."

Samantha Noon sneered at the man's weakness, then answered Hobb's question. "Yeah, we got everything—"

"What was that?" Kelly interrupted, staring off into the dark woods. She had heard something off in the distance: a voice. A familiar voice.

"I didn't hear anything," Noon said gruffly.

"I heard it." Hobb rose, peering into the night. "Goggles," he ordered. Garb, closest to him, removed his night vision gear and handed the goggles over. Hobb lifted them to his good eye and scanned the area where the sound had come from.

"There it is again!" Kelly shouted, her heart leaping.

"Keep it down," Noon hissed.

Meredith. It had to be. She'd recognize the kid's sweet-natured voice anywhere. Suddenly, Kelly took off running.

"What are you doing..." Noon grabbed at her, but Kelly slipped the woman's grasp and was gone through the trees.

Hobb wiped puke from his chin and started after Kelly, calling back over his shoulder to Samantha Noon. "Take 'em to the road and hold position there. We'll catch up!"

Noon took a few steps after her commanding officer. "But... what if it's Jason?"

Hobb didn't answer. Mostly because he didn't want to entertain the possibility, but also because he had seen the look on Kelly's face. She knew who was out there and she was worried about whoever it was. Holding the night vision goggles to his left eye, he watched Kelly race through the forest as he followed. She was running like a gazelle, darting in and out between the trees and bounding over any obstacles in her path. Pretty good for a chick in a sundress. Hobb couldn't catch the woman. At one point, he snagged a boot on a fallen log, hitting the ground face first, almost losing Kelly before he could get back on his feet and move again. The fall reopened the cuts on his face and blood was streaming down his cheek and neck once again. He swore. At this rate, he was going to need the entire right side of his head amputated

and replaced with fiberglass. The trees thinned and he saw Kelly dash out across the dirt road ahead. Had they come that far already? Maybe they were both hearing things; maybe there wasn't anything out here after all. Either that, or sound just carried a long way out here.

As Hobb burst from the tree line, he was relieved to see Kelly standing in the middle of the road. The woman was gasping for breath and spinning around, looking in every direction. Hobb caught up to her, breathing hard. "All right, Jesse fucking Owens, let's listen for a minute, okay?"

Kelly nodded breathlessly. They both tried to quell their heavy breathing as they peered into the trees on either side of the road. There. And then gone. Hobb knew he'd seen it, though: a bright white figure moving through the forest on the lake side of the road. And he was sure as hell it wasn't Jason Voorhees.

"C'mon," he said, grabbing Kelly's arm and leading her on into the woods.

As they tromped through the trees, they heard it again: a girl's voice. And unless Hobb was mistaken, she was calling for Jason.

"Meredith!" Kelly called.

The girl's voice stopped. Hobb and Kelly paused, listening, trying to get their bearings. He hadn't seen the ghostly figure since they'd left the road.

Then, softly, uncertainly: "K... Kelly?"

Ahead, to the right. Kelly was out of his grasp and running through the trees once again. "Meredith!"

The pale figure came into view again, and Hobb felt his stomach do a somersault. He flung the night vision goggles to the ground and stared at her under the moonlight. A teenage girl, he thought, naked as a jaybird.

"Oh my God, you're okay!" Kelly shouted racing forward to embrace the girl.

Hobb averted his eyes, feeling the rage building inside him.

"I thought you were dead. They told me you were dead," Meredith said, tears pouring from her eyes.

"Yeah, well, they're a bunch of goddamn liars, you should know that by now." Kelly eased her grip on the girl, stepping back to look at her. "What are you doing out here like this?"

Ashamed, Meredith tried to cover herself with her hands.

"That's what I'd like to know," Hobb snarled. "How old is this girl...?" He spun, addressing the question to Meredith. "How old are you?"

Meredith's lip trembled. "Seventeen," she whispered.

"Jesus Christ," Hobb said, unfastening his bulletproof vest and flinging it aside, followed by his helmet.

Kelly's eyes widened as Hobb unzipped his coveralls. "What the hell

are you doing?"

Hobb pulled his coveralls open and wriggled out of the sleeves. "Getting her something to wear." He pulled his sleeveless white undershirt off and threw it to Kelly. "It probably smells like hell, but put it on."

Kelly stared for a moment at the brutal scars that adorned Hobb's torso like a road map, then she gave the wife-beater T-shirt to Meredith, who turned away demurely and slipped into it. Hobb wasn't any taller than the girl, but the shirttail was long enough that, with a little stretching, it covered what it needed to.

"What the hell kind of scumbags are up there at that little church of yours?" he snapped at Kelly. "Making a seventeen year-old girl run around naked, and God only knows what else. How the hell did you get involved with them? You seem like a pretty smart girl, otherwise, but this, I tell ya, I'm fuckin' baffled. Not to mention royally pissed-off."

Kelly stammered for a second, but before she could frame a response, Meredith spoke up.

"They didn't make me get naked," she said quietly. "And Kelly's not like them."

Zipping his coveralls back up, Hobb stepped towards the girl. "What's your name?"

"Meredith."

"Meredith. So they didn't make you get naked? But they still allowed it." What in the hell was going on? Hobb thought it might be a nice way to pass the rest of the evening if he could saunter into Camp Crystal Lake and shoot everybody in the face.

"No," Meredith explained. "They don't know. I did it myself, out here by the lake."

Kelly stroked the girl's hair. "But why, honey?"

Meredith stared timidly at Kelly. "To make myself... to be pure in front of the Lord."

Hobb rolled his single eye. Holy Sweet Jesus in a Hummer.

"I had to be pure, unadorned, so I could face judgment for my sins," Meredith said.

"Oh no," Kelly said, grabbing the girl and pulling her into an embrace. "No, no, no." She pulled away, looking into Meredith's eyes. "You were out here looking for Jason?"

"What the fuck for?" Hobb asked. "Fuck... I mean... sorry about the language."

"It's okay," Meredith sniffed. "Kelly does it all the time."

Kelly looked at Hobb. "It's like I told you. Long believes Jason Voorhees is the hand of God and the motherfucker is here to pass judgment on unclean souls."

"Do you really believe that, Meredith?" Hobb knelt in front of the

anguished girl. "He's a killer. A murderer. There's nothing holy about Jason Voorhees. Unholy, maybe. But I can assure you that he—without the slightest doubt—is not the hand of God."

Meredith fought back tears. "I don't know... I don't know what I believe anymore! All I know is that my mom and dad are dead—"

"Aw, baby," Kelly interjected, holding the girl closer. "I'm so sorry."

"Everybody in the church is crazy and Mr Rickles is... is... he's trying to touch me and do stuff to me..."

"Rickles?" Hobb asked, looking to Kelly for confirmation.

"He's a real sleazebag. I think he used to be a Marine," Kelly told him. "Um, no offense," she hastily added. "It's not that I think he's a sleazebag because he was a Marine."

"I know what you mean," Hobb said, waving her off. That might explain why a bunch of religious freaks could pull off a successful ambush against a trained strike team, he realized. Meredith wiped her nose.

Hobb stood up, shaking his head. "Don't you worry, little girl. I'm puttin' this Mr Rickles guy on my goddamn list of things to do today."

"I'm not a little girl," she sniffled.

Yeah, I can see that, Hobb thought. And apparently so could this Rickles character. If an ex-jarhead really was calling the shots, then it might be a simple matter of taking him out of the picture to bring a quick end to the conflict with the church folk—or at least send them running around like the proverbial chickens—minus their heads, unable to figure out what direction to point their guns. A simple solution to a complex problem. Of course, Hobb could never be that lucky.

"I'm sorry," Hobb told Meredith. "I know you're not." He pretended not to notice her erect nipples, jutting through the fabric of his T-shirt. "You've gotta be cold, though..." Ohmigod, he thought. I can't believe I just said that. "What do you say we get you out of here?"

"Oh God," Kelly said quietly, a stunned expression on her face.

Hobb looked at the woman. She was staring somewhere past Meredith's right shoulder. Following her gaze, he suddenly felt very cold himself.

Jason Voorhees stood in the shadows not twenty feet away, watching them intently.

"Get out of here," Hobb whispered to Kelly and Meredith. "Go."

As if triggered by Hobb's words, Jason lunged forward, raising his machete for action.

"RUN!" Hobb yelled lifting his gun.

Meredith screamed. Hobb squeezed the trigger. The roar of the FN MK46 drowned the girl out as it spat flame and fury, the 5.56 caliber slugs tearing up the trees all around the advancing killer, pounding

into his body.

Gripping the girl's hand, Kelly ran, hauling Meredith back towards the road.

Round after round slammed into Jason's torso. Chunks of meat burst from his body, accompanied by spurting ribbons of blood. The assault rocked the masked madman in his tracks, but slowed him down only a little. Hobb's finger clenched the trigger. The gun jerked and rattled in his grip. No way, he thought. No way am I not hitting something vital. Why won't he stop? The legs. Take out the legs. Lowering the barrel of his rifle slightly, Hobb continued to unleash the withering onslaught of hot lead. Following the gun's motion, a trail of bullets tracked down Jason's belly and across his crotch, sending up a fireworks show of gore. The slugs ate into the killer's thighs, the impact so strong it knocked his legs out from under him. Hobb rejoiced silently as Jason was hurled face down in the dirt, slamming to the ground with a brutal impact. Not letting up, Hobb poured lead into the psychopath's broad back. Blood shot skywards like a gory lawn sprinkler. Still Hobb continued to fire, gun crazy. Until his magazine was spent.

"Fuck," Hobb swore. He expelled the spent ammo cassette and went to his vest pocket for another. It was then that he realized his vest was still on the ground, where he had dropped it when he gave his undershirt to Meredith. And he hadn't loaded the belt feed on the rifle.

Unbelievably, Jason was getting to his feet. Hobb darted to where his vest lay in the dirt, then glanced at Jason. The motherfucker is almost up! Hobb checked a pocket. No, that's a frag grenade and he's too fucking close for a frag grenade, and where the hell is my goddamn ammo? With the vest bunched up, he couldn't be sure where he had stored anything, and he didn't really want to take his eyes off Jason, who was up on his feet and coming at Hobb again. Jason looked seriously pissed off and his machete looked extremely sharp. Hobb jumped up, ready to split. The vest slipped from his grasp, dropping to the ground once again. He bounced on one foot for a moment, torn between making another grab for the vest or simply getting the hell out of there. A glance at the hulking maniac striding towards him settled it. Hobb took off running, nearly falling over Samantha Noon in the process.

FIFTEEN

"Get those girls out of here. We'll buy you some time!" Noon hollered. Operator Marr stood beside her, cocking his shotgun and drawing a bead on Jason.

"Just fuckin' run!" Hobb shouted as he ducked past Noon. She said something in response, but it was lost under the thunder as she opened up with her own FN MK46 and Marr cut loose with his shotgun. Jason's body was battered by the force of the attack, twitching and dancing as bullets tore into him. He struggled to move towards the Operators, but the sheer firepower held him back, as if he were trying to walk into hurricane-strength winds. Blood exploded from Jason's convulsing body.

Samantha Noon advanced, snarling, putting round after round into the lunatic's chest. Flame from the muzzle of her gun lit up the night. She was aiming for Jason's heart, the torrent of bullets opening up a gory, shredded mess where the thing ought to be. Bits of stringy meat were flung from Jason's torso, his shirt tearing away to tattered strips. But he wouldn't fall. Noon snapped off her words one at a time through clenched teeth as she continued to pour gunfire into Jason's chest. "I... would... like... you... to... DIE!"

Jason Voorhees, however, was not cooperating.

Operator Marr stepped past her on the left, his shotgun firing a ribbon of flame. Noon watched the weapon rip holes in Jason's torso, shoving him back a few feet. Then the killer was coming at them again, despite the rain of lead impacting his body. Marr moved a couple steps closer as he fired another round, hoping to put a bigger hole in the target.

Then Noon's gun clicked. She couldn't believe it. She had emptied the belt into him; two hundred rounds. His chest had to be like meat pudding by then, and he was still coming at them, staring with those yellow, dead eyes. Marr's shotgun lit up the scene again, the buckshot tearing through Jason's right knee, blowing bits of bone and cartilage away. Finally, Voorhees wobbled a little. Marr took another step towards the blood-spattered murderer, preparing to take out the other knee.

"Not too close, Marr!" Noon warned. With practiced ease, she slid an ammo cassette from her vest pocket and jammed it into the machine gun, keeping her eyes on Jason the entire time. Which is why she saw the machete flash towards Marr's throat and the streak of blood that trailed behind the blade. Choking, the man staggered backwards, putting himself directly between Noon and Jason. He spun to stare with wild eyes at Noon, blood burbling from the deep slash at the base of his neck.

"Holy shit!" Noon said, before the tip of the machete erupted from Marr's Kevlar vest directly in the center of his chest. A spout of blood hosed across Noon's face, effectively obliterating her view through the night vision goggles. Marr's last act before his life sputtered away was to squeeze the trigger one more time. The big shotgun coughed up a fireball. It could have been worse; the blast only took off two of the toes on Noon's right foot. Screaming in pain, she collapsed to that side, instinctively pulling the trigger of her own weapon. If Marr hadn't already been quite dead, he could have been considered lucky. The half-dozen 5.56caliber rounds Noon had fired whizzed past his falling body, thudding into the trees beyond.

As Marr's corpse fell across Noon, the dead weight drove her machine gun back into her face, striking her mouth. Tasting blood and unable to see through her goggles, the woman frantically wriggled backwards, trying to go where she knew Jason wasn't. Slithering out from under her fallen comrade, Noon reached up to tear her night vision goggles off...

Jason Voorhees, looked down, his machete arcing directly towards her face.

Grunting, Noon dodged to the side. The machete cut into the ground an inch away from her head, showering her face with dirt. Still got the gun, still got the gun. She lifted the nose of the machine gun towards Jason as he withdrew the machete, preparing for another strike. As she pulled the trigger, Jason's left hand closed over the barrel. Three or four slugs hit him in the chest before he yanked the gun from her grip and hurled it away. The super-heated barrel seared the dead flesh of Jason's hand, filling the air with a noxious stench. Shrieking uncharacteristically, Noon rolled away a microsecond before the machete blade came down again. Twisting, she fired a staggering kick into the side of Jason's head, snapping it aside.

The brutish madman turned back slowly to glower at her. The kick had knocked his mask slightly askew, and only one of the yellow eyes peered out at her. Noon found that somehow satisfying, as if she'd injured him. As Jason reached up to straighten his mask, Noon scuttled to her left and pushed herself up on her feet, favoring her wounded leg. She risked a quick look around for her gun, but it was nowhere to be seen. Didn't matter. She'd tear his guts out with her bare hands if she had to.

Then Jason, his mask properly aligned once again, was coming at her.

Thanks to the heavy gunfire that Noon and Marr had unleashed, the entire front of Jason's torso looked like it had been smeared with pepperoni pizza, blood everywhere. Torn flesh danced around as the killer stomped towards her, his decayed hands outstretched. Noon

leapt, rocketing a spinning kick—with her gunshot foot—into her attacker. The blow impacted on Jason's right shoulder, barely jarring him. Noon howled with pain as she came back down, putting even more hurt on her shredded foot. With incredible speed, Jason responded with a backhanded left that smashed her nose and sent a fountain of blood gushing into the dirt. Noon staggered backwards, somehow managing to stay on her feet. She bent at the waist, badly rattled. Somebody was flipping the lights on and off in her skull. Blood streamed down her face. Her foot felt like she had run it down a garbage disposal and then dipped it in lye. And then put it back in the garbage disposal for another round.

Agonizingly, she lifted her head to see Jason reaching for her. "No!"

Her words were silenced as his thick fingers closed on her throat. She felt her trachea collapsing under the crushing grip. As Jason lifted her off the ground, Samantha Noon tore at him with both hands, clawing chunks of meat from his demolished torso and flinging them in every direction. The masked maniac stared at his flailing victim, seemingly unaware that pieces of him were being ripped away and hurled into the bushes.

He raised his machete.

Noon's eyes widened as she stared at the blade that was poised to strike, but she continued to rip furiously at Jason Voorhees. A shred of his own flesh was slung across the blade of the machete. The killer looked at the dripping piece of meat, then casually flicked it from the blade. Then he plunged the machete into Noon's guts, sawing the blade in and out, excruciatingly working it upwards. Noon gave up trying to tear Jason apart and focused instead on holding her intestines in place. She felt the machete scrape upwards against her breastbone, then whoever was working that light switch in her head turned it off for good.

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Maybe Rickles was right. Maybe I should just leave.

Upstairs in the main cabin at Camp Crystal Lake, Don James continued to linger outside Father Long's bedroom. The sounds of the father's spiritual guidance of the three widowed women had ceased a short time before, but Don still hadn't worked up the nerve to knock on the door, largely because his concerns over recent developments at the ministry had slowly mutated into simple anger. Especially once he'd heard the sounds emanating from Father Long's room. Now he could hear gunfire off in the distance.

None of it was right. Don quietly sucked in a deep breath, fighting his emotions. Just like every other member of the congregation, he had a story of his own about how Father Long had pulled him up by his

bootstraps, lifted him from the cesspool of sin he'd been wallowing in. And he felt terrible about the anger that was rising within him. All of it was wrong. Folding his muscular arms across his chest, Don gazed at the assortment of ugly tattoos marring his flesh. He'd acquired most of them during his stay in prison, when he did a stretch for possession with intent to distribute. What a joke, he thought. Dealing meth was his career. And he had some pretty grand plans where that career was concerned. He wasn't going to be some penny-ante street hustler, working out of a crack motel in a poor neighborhood. He was going to create a network of distributors—not dealers, that was thinking too small, he needed distributors—and branch out his operation into a multi-state network. There were dreams of a beachfront property down Mexico way, and long drives on empty highways, straddling his bike with the wind in his face and money in his wallet. Lots and lots of money. Don't get him started on the girls.

Then his biggest client dropped dime on him. He was lucky, really; he only wound up doing five years, but it wrecked all of his plans, left him destitute and struggling to get along in the real world. He was working at a laundromat for six bucks an hour, making change for obnoxious college students and cleaning lint out of the dryer traps when he met Father Long. The good father had come into the laundromat late one night, asking if he could post a flyer for his little strip-mall church on the bulletin board. Don had never been one to buy into any kind of religious mumbo-jumbo, but his mother was pretty hardcore about God in heaven and all that—before she got shot in the stomach by a carjacker in a Wal-Mart parking lot—and died crying while people pushed loaded shopping carts past her. Don hadn't had anything else to do that night, though, so he and the father had talked. By the end of his shift, Don was on his knees begging for Jesus to come into his life.

He'd gotten a little more than he bargained for with Father Long and the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel, however. The father's beliefs about Jason Voorhees weren't openly discussed with new members of the congregation. Long always introduced people into the true nature of the church slowly. It was something of a radical belief system, to put it mildly, and Long liked to be sure people were surfing on his wave before he sprung all the details on them. Admittedly, Don had been a little put off by it at first, but the more Father Long explained to him his theory about Jason Voorhees being the hand of God, the more sense it made. And he sure as hell wouldn't have minded turning Jason loose on the punk who had put a slug in his mother's belly leaving her to die on the cold pavement. There was a sinner who needed judging, for certain.

It had all sounded good in theory. But deep inside, Don never really

believed any of it would come to pass. For one thing, how the hell did Father Long ever expect to bring Jason Voorhees back, or even find him in the first place? To him, it was like waiting around for Jesus Christ to return. Something to build some spiritual faith around maybe, but it was unlikely he'd ever see the day. And truthfully, Don hadn't been sure he even wanted to see the day.

Life as a member of the ministry had been good. He wasn't getting rich—while Father Long paid him a small stipend for all the work he did for the church, Don still needed his job at the laundromat in order to make ends meet—but he was *happy*, and that was something he wasn't quite sure he'd known since he was a little kid. And somehow, being involved with the church and making new friends amongst the congregation made it easier to choke down that laundromat job. Some of the college kids still rubbed him the wrong way, of course, and it wasn't like he was sipping margaritas on the veranda while gazing out at the ocean, but he could still pop the top on a cold Corona, sit on the sidewalk outside the laundromat, and watch the traffic go by. And when it came right down to it, that had some honest appeal all its own. Give him that and some Motley Crue on the CD player and he figured he could live out the rest of his life just fine, without ever seeing the hand of God clench His judgmental fingers.

Then Curtis Rickles and Father Long had found the body and things started getting truly weird. Don hadn't been very comfortable with any of it since then, but for some reason he hadn't spoken up about any of his misgivings. For one thing, the rest of the congregation seemed so excited about the day of reckoning being upon the world, and Don didn't want to seem like the odd man out after everything Father Long and the ministry had done for him. Then they'd brought Jason Voorhees kicking and screaming back to life, and people started dying. Good people, people who didn't deserve to go out like they had.

And now here he was, standing around—loitering, that's what Rickles had called it, and the word certainly fit—outside the father's bedroom, waiting from him to finish soothing the souls of his new wives, hoping he could finally talk some sense into the man. Or, if he had to, to solve the problem in another way, whatever it took to make things right.

His mind returned to Father Long, who was in there fucking the wives of three decent men who had given up their lives. Three men who had died because they put their faith in Father Long. No matter what you believed about God, or the devil, or Jason Voorhees, the kind of behavior Long was displaying in return for that faith was just plain wrong. And it made Don James very angry. The whole scenario was worsening with every passing hour, and it was time he did something about it. For God's sake, he had gone along with Father Long and

Rickles when they wanted to ambush those soldiers. He had shot other men. Probably killed at least one of them, maybe more. And while he might have been dragging along a somewhat checkered past, being a killer had never entered into the equation. Father Long had taught him to love the Lord, and he figured that whole list of His commandments came along with the package. "Thou shalt not kill," as the big man upstairs put it so eloquently.

But Father Long seemed to be taking over as the big man upstairs. Making his own list of commandments: "Thou shalt go ahead and kill if I say it's okay," and, "Bring unto me thy widowed wives so that I might enjoy the pleasures of their flesh," being chief among them. And, he thought, let's not forget the classic: "Thou shalt feel free to get it on with a seventeen year-old girl if it tickles thy fancy." Don's lip curled in a sneer of distaste. Curtis Rickles's dogged pursuit of Meredith Host was sickening, and he couldn't understand how Father Long could not only stand by and allow it to happen, but seemingly condone it as well.

Don brought a hand up to rub his brow. His head was aching terribly. He should have spoken up earlier, when Meredith was trying to talk sense to the congregation after Jason was revived. She to be the only one in the group who had her damn head screwed on straight. Just a kid, a teenager, but she saw through Father Long's... Don hesitated at the thought. Just call it what it through Father is: madness. The girl had seen Long's madness and tried to do something about it, tried to save the others from falling victim to it. And Don had stood by in silence, allowing them to shout her down, make her look foolish. Not to mention allowing Curtis Rickles to put his hands all over the poor kid. And now she was gone, run off into the night. She might even be dead, if her luck was bad and she ran into Jason out there. Don hoped like hell she had made it out, that she had tracked down the soldiers and found some help there. But more than anything, he hoped Curtis Rickles wouldn't track her down.

Don figured, if he was going to kill another man, there couldn't be a better choice of victim than Curtis Rickles. He had tried to give the guy the benefit of the doubt at first, what with him being an ex-Marine and all, but it became more and more difficult for him to cut the guy any slack. Then he remembered that Timothy McVeigh had served his country, too, before slaughtering hundreds of innocent people in Oklahoma City. No, the hard and simple truth was that Rickles was nothing but a scumbag and a predator. And Don was starting to believe the same thing about Father Long. It was time to voice his concerns. Stop letting all the horrible shit happen without trying to do something about it.

Don James stared at the bare wooden door separating him from Father Long. His headache pounded, sending spikes of pain through

his skull. Steeling himself, he pushed himself away from the wall and stepped up to the door. He didn't like the idea of interrupting what was going on in there, didn't want to see it, but something had to be done, and nobody else in the congregation seemed inclined to do it. Don raised his hand, curling it into a tight fist. It was time to end the madness. Or at least give it his best shot. No one e else should die because of Long's insane beliefs. If it came down to it, he thought he could even bring himself to kill the father. Maybe. Doing so would probably get *him* killed, but at least it might save lives in the long run.

All Don had to do was knock on the door. He stared at his clenched fist, the knuckles whitening, his arm trembling.

He stared at the tattoos scattered across his flesh. Father Long had once offered to pay for their removal, if Don wanted them gone. He chose to keep them, as a reminder of what his life had been, what the ministry had saved him from. Just knock on the door. End this now. Gasping, Don suddenly lowered his arm to his side. The painful throbbing in his temples matched the rapid beating of his heart. The gunfire outside had died away. His nose mere inches away from Father Long's door, Don stared at its wooden surface for several moments. Then he turned and walked away.

SIXTEEN

Behind the wooden door that Don James had walked away from, content in his sparse room, Father Long lay with his head back against Patricia Krenkle's sweaty belly and listened intently to the night, hoping to hear more gunfire. The sound seemed to come from far away. Probably the soldiers, he thought. The unbelievers encountering the hand of God. Long smiled at the thought of the sinners meeting their rightful fate.

Beside Patricia, lying on her stomach, Christine Shearing stared up at Father Long with a blank expression. She looked shell-shocked, lost inside herself. Not unexpected, considering what she had been through. What they'd all been through. The temperature in the room was stifling, as if the entire day's heat had collected there. The strenuous physical activity that had taken place only added to the uncomfortable warmth, and now the smell of sweat and sex hung in the thick air like fog.

Father Long's eyes flicked towards Susanna Bookwalter, who stood at the window, gazing out into the night. All of them were nude, including Long. He had done his best to soothe the pain of their losses the only way he knew how, but it was obvious that he had more work to do in that respect. None of the three seemed to take much comfort in his ministrations, although Christine and Susanna had wept. Surely a sign of release, he thought.

"Do you... Do you think they're fighting again?" Susanna asked nervously, the words clinging to her throat as if determined to stay buried in her chest.

"It's too far away, I think," Long said, stroking Patricia's thigh. "Besides, if the soldiers were back, someone would have come for me... for us. So you three could be taken to a safer place in the camp."

Susanna turned towards him. "What do you think it is, then?"

Long smiled languorously at her. "Perhaps our enemies have met with judgment." He patted the bed. "Come lie down with us."

Hesitantly, Susanna walked to the bed and stretched out on her belly alongside Christine.

"Roll over. So I can see the Lord's work in you," Long said, gesturing.

With a glance at Patricia, Susanna did as Father Long asked, shifting in the bed and rolling onto her back. Her large breasts sagged towards her armpits and she cupped them in her hands as if trying to keep them from escaping. At forty-four, Susanna was the oldest of the three women, but carried her age well, aside from her deep lack of self-confidence and a few shiny stretch marks. In the quiet of the evening, Father Long listened to the soft breathing of his female companions. His wives. After a few moments, a distant, muffled scream drifted to

the cabin.

"Judgment," Long said, smiling in satisfaction.

Patricia Krenkle began to cry, very softly.

"Why doesn't Christine have to lie on her back?" Susanna asked, staring blankly up at the ceiling. She still struggled to contain her sweaty breasts in her relatively tiny hands.

"Roll over, Christine," Long urged the woman. "We're all family here, after all."

Sighing, Christine wriggled and twisted, rolling onto her back and settling in again, her sweaty body slipping down between Susanna's and Patricia's. A thick, pinkish-white, jagged scar ran from somewhere within her pubic hair upwards across her belly, coming to a stop just below her left breast. It looked as if her appendix had been removed by a threshing machine.

Susanna stared at the scar, her mouth hanging open slightly. "I'm... I'm sorry."

"You didn't see it before?"

Susanna shook her head, her gaze shifting to Christine's face. "I didn't want to look at everyone," she whispered. "What hap... happened?"

"I was in a car wreck six years ago," Christine explained. "Part of the dashboard went through me. I died on the operating table."

"But she was resurrected." Father Long traced the length of the horrible scar, his fingertips sliding over the gnarled lumps of flesh. As his fingers delved into Christine's pubic hair, he smiled up at Susanna's stunned face. "As we all shall be... to join God in His glorious Kingdom."

His hand dipped between Christine's legs.

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When Hobb caught up to Kelly and Meredith, the two were standing in the middle of the dirt road, clinging tightly to each other.

"What the hell are you doin' standing around?" he asked, coming to a stop next to them.

"We didn't know where to go," Kelly said, her voice trembling.

That made sense. Hobb looked up and down the dark road, trying to spot the strike team. "Where's everybody else?"

Kelly shook her head. "I don't know, we haven't seen anybody."

Meredith was crying again. The sight of Jason Voorhees coming at her must have shaken something loose. The girl shuddered violently as huge, wet sobs came from deep within her body.

Feeling bad for her, Hobb almost told her everything would be okay, then thought better of it. No reason to bullshit the dame any more than she'd already been bullshitted. "Noon must've sent them further down,

towards the campground. We'd better catch up."

"What about the..." Kelly searched for the words, settling for a gesture instead. She pointed back towards where they'd run into Jason. "... Noon, and the other one?"

"His name was Marr." Hobb shook his head. "You heard the same screams, as I did."

Kelly looked at the ground.

"They bought us a chance."

Kelly's eyes snapped back up to connect angrily with Hobb's. "Is that all the feeling you have? Two people died for us and all you can say is 'They bought us a chance'?"

"Don't talk to me about how I feel, lady."

"Is it because she beat the hell out of you back there, is that why you don't care?"

"You mean I should have real feelings?" Hobb snapped. "Kind of like the way you ran out on your friends when Jason was cutting them down in your little church, those kind of feelings?"

Kelly glanced at Meredith, ashamed.

"We have to get moving." Hobb felt bad about what he'd said, but they didn't have time for this nonsense. "Otherwise we're throwing away what Noon and Marr died for." He lifted his machine gun, displaying it for Kelly and Meredith. "Out of ammo. I'm basically unarmed here, except for my sidearm. And since I just put a shitload of bullets into the so-called hand of God back there, and it didn't even slow him down, I'd say that a pistol isn't going to help us much." Hobb slung the rifle over his shoulder, then drew his sidearm, an HK M23, and flipped the safety off. "I could try to blind him by shining the laser sight in his eyes.

"I don't think you should make jokes," Meredith snapped, frowning at him.

"You're right," Hobb said. "I shouldn't."

With that, he put a gentle hand on Kelly's back and the three began walking at a fast pace. Hobb directed them towards the tree line, where they'd have a chance to find cover if they ran into anything untoward. He was a little concerned about Meredith's bare feet, but figured stepping on a stick or a broken beer bottle was better than walking in the open, where the girl's chances of taking a bullet in the heart, or a machete in the face, increased dramatically.

As the three made their way along the roadside, Noon's dying screams replayed themselves in Hobb's head. What would you have done about it, he asked himself. Throw your gun at him? You let her die for you. You let Marr die for you. He should have gone back. Kelly was right. He was an asshole. Hobb's teeth ground together in frustration. Why should he have gone back? So he could die too? He

was out of ammo. He had expected Noon and Marr to lay down a little suppressing fire, then run into the forest. Shit, he thought. I told them to run. They didn't have to turn it into an all-or-nothing scenario.

One thing was certain: he wouldn't have to make a decision about retiring, assuming he lived through this in the first place. He'd be lucky if all the Agency did was kick his ass to the curb and not bury him in a deep, dark cell reserved for only the most colossal fuck-ups.

Hobb scanned the trees on either side of the road, watching for any sign of movement. Every fifty feet or so, he let out a tiny clicking sound, a signal to the strike team. If any of the Operators were close, they'd respond in kind. And ideally, not shoot him and the women. Exhaustion washed over him. How long had it been since he'd last slept? And the other Operators had been going just as hard as he had. Harder than that; most of them had been involved in the firefight earlier. They had to be wiped out, ready to drop. He lifted his arm and pushed his sleeve back to check his watch. 4:15am. It'd be light soon. They needed to get to Camp Crystal Lake while it was still dark, while they still had some sort of advantage. Suddenly, he saw Crystal Lake. There was an answer to Hobb's signal.

Meredith spun, looking excitedly at Hobb. "Did you hear that?"

He put a finger to his lips, shushing the girl. "There's a reason we make little bird sounds instead of talking," he whispered.

About ten yards down the road, the helmeted head of one of the Operators poked up from behind some bushes. With the night vision goggles obscuring the man's face, Hobb couldn't be sure who it was, but as they drew closer he recognized Chaffin's dented chin. There was still a little grease from the underside of the LAV smeared on it.

A handful of other Operators stepped into view as Chaffin pushed his goggles up to give Hobb a questioning look. "Where's Noon? Marr?"

"We ran into Jason Voorhees," Hobb said. "They didn't make it."

"Son of a bitch," Chaffin hissed. "We're running out of Operators real fuckin' fast, here."

"Have you been able to get through to Lovinger and Blair... or Acheson?"

"Radio's been hit-or-miss, as usual. Last word from Lovinger, he was still trying to get through to HQ, call in some help. At least that's what it sounded like he said. Hasn't been anything since."

Hobb stared out at Crystal Lake. Fuckin' cesspool. The road curved away to the right just ahead, leading to the campground and the assholes who were responsible for making his life a living hell.

Sighing, Hobb turned back to Chaffin. "Anybody scope things out up ahead?"

"Yeah." Chaffin ran the edge of his thumb along the deep cleft in his chin, smearing the grease around a little more. Hobb wondered if he

ever lost any food in the cavernous dent.

"Um..." Meredith said. Smiling sheepishly, she hesitantly reached out and wiped the grease from Chaffin's chin with her thumb, Chaffin looked at her curiously, and she held the thumb up for him to see the black goo. Then she wiped it clean on Hobb's T-shirt. Ah well, Hobb thought. Not like it didn't have blood on it already.

"Thanks," Chaffin told the girl, smiling.

"Finish your story," Hobb prompted the chunky Operator

"Oh yeah." Chaffin returned his attention to Hobb, looking more than a little embarrassed. "We spotted a couple guys with hunting rifles patrolling the campground, but if they've got men placed anywhere else, they know how to hide 'em."

Hobb glanced at Kelly. "Word on the street is they've got a jarhead calling plays."

"I love that story," Chaffin said. "What's the plan?"

"What do we have left—men and materiel?"

"Eight Operators, not including Lovinger, Blair, and Acheson. Three MK46s, four shotguns, one Milkor. A couple men have frags and phosphorous." Chaffin was looking funny at Hobb. "Where's your vest and helmet?"

"Don't ask. I'm out of ammo, by the way—got a spare?"

Chaffin slipped an ammo cassette from his vest and handed it over. "You put an entire cassette into Jason Voorhees?"

Holstering his sidearm, Hobb nodded sharply.

"And he kept coming?"

Hobb stared at Chaffin as he slipped his machine gun off his shoulder and drove the cassette into place. "Yeah."

Chaffin's normally reddish cheeks paled. He ammo swallowed hard. "Sir?" Chaffin said.

"Yeah?"

"I ask again. What's the plan?"

Hobb looked past his rifle at the man. "We're going on to Camp Crystal Lake. If somebody shoots at us, we kill 'em."

SEVENTEEN

"You know," Operator Blair began, lying back on the padded bench to rest his head on his wadded up Kevlar vest, "I'm just as happy to be sitting the rest of this out, even if my leg is all fucked up."

"Not me, buddy," Lovinger replied. He was seated on the bench across from Blair. "I feel like a sitting duck." He gazed around, as if he could see through the LAV's heavily armored walls into the darkness of the forest that surrounded them. "Jason could be right outside this thing, right now. Waiting."

Blair closed his eyes, amused by his comrade's unfounded worry. "Dude, he already tried to kill me once and he couldn't do it. That's means I'm golden. It's like flying with someone who survived a plane crash. You're safer here with me than you would be anywhere else."

"Maybe so. Except that if you survive a plane crash, the plane doesn't chase you down to finish the job."

Blair snorted. "You're welcome to test my theory any way you see fit. Me, I'm going to relax and do my job."

Lovinger looked at the other Operator, splayed out across the bench with his eyes closed and a peaceful look on his face. "And your job is napping, I take it?"

Blair opened his eyes and cocked his head towards

Lovinger, grinning. "Shit, even if I wanted to do anything, Moseley's got me pumped full of so much painkiller I wouldn't be any good at it. So yes, to answer your question: the way I see it, my job at the moment is napping."

"We're supposed to be trying to raise headquarters on the radio."

"We tried that a whole bunch of times. We failed." Blair closed his eyes once again. "But if you'd shut the fuck up, I imagine I could achieve some real success at napping."

"You heard that gunfire; the rest of the team is out there, shooting at something. Doesn't that concern you?" Lovinger snapped.

Sighing, Blair opened his eyes to look at his fellow Operator again. "Shooting at something is their job, it's sort of expected, don't you think?"

"That's not my point—"

"Look," Blair interrupted. "I told you, I'm jacked up on a shitload of morphine. Of course I'm concerned about the rest of the team, but the truth is, I can barely remember where the hell I am from moment to moment. Now you feel free to go on out there and try to help the others, or to get on the fucking radio and squawk away all you want to, but meanwhile get the fuck off my back. All right?" Blair stared at Lovinger, waiting for a response.

"All right," Lovinger said finally.

Blair's eyelids fluttered closed. "Then we're cool."

"We're cool," Lovinger agreed. He pushed himself to his feet, favoring his wounded leg. "Sorry," he added.

"It is not a problem at all, I assure you," Blair said. His words were beginning to sound a bit slurred.

Lovinger looked around, his head bowed to avoid hitting it on the ceiling of the armored transport. He wasn't quite sure why he had stood up in the first place. Just a little bout with cabin fever, he guessed. He hated being cooped up in the LAV. The gunshot wound in his leg was killing him, and Moseley sure as hell hadn't given him any morphine. All he got was industrial-strength Ibuprofen.

He looked back at Blair. The Operator was out cold, his lower lip fluttering in and out with each gentle breath. Lovinger was willing to bet he could be successful at napping, too, if he'd been up before the rest of the team took off. Instead he was stuck there, going nuts from a bizarre combination of boredom and terror. Gun battles didn't scare Lovinger in the least—he'd been through plenty of them, after all. Jason Voorhees scares the living shit out of me, he admitted to himself. In a normal gunfight, you shoot somebody, they stay shot. If you're lucky, they die and then they can't shoot back at you anymore. But Jason Voorhees... he just wouldn't do what he was supposed to do, no matter how much lead you sank into him. It was completely unacceptable.

Lovinger limped to the front of the vehicle. Maybe he'd try one more time to raise Acheson back at the strike team's base camp. It couldn't hurt, anyway, and he was fed up with sitting around doing nothing. Taking care not to whack his wounded leg on anything, Lovinger eased himself into the driver's seat and picked up the microphone. Talking on one of those things always reminded him of Burt Reynolds movies—well, the *Smokey and the Bandit* movies, anyway. Burt had done plenty of movies where he never once used a CB radio. People tended to forget that. Not Lovinger, though. He considered himself to be an expert on the career of Burt Reynolds. Hell, he even liked *Skullduggery*, and most people had never even heard of that movie, let alone seen it. His favorites, though, were *Deliverance* and *The Longest Yard*. Whenever Lovinger started dating a new girl, he made her watch one or the other of those to make sure she was okay. He had found that *The Longest Yard* tended to result in his getting laid a lot more than *Deliverance* did. Understandable, he supposed. Lovinger keyed the mic and lifted it to his face, trying to speak quietly. "Base Camp, this is Element One, do you read, over?"

A soft growl escaped Blair at the back of the LAV. "Enough, sir," the doped-up Operator muttered, then drifted off to sleep again.

Lovinger smiled. Keying the mic again, he whispered softly this time.

"Base Camp, please respond, over." He released the key and waited for a response. To pass the time, he thought about the crazy dream he'd had the night before the strike team had left for Camp Crystal Lake. He and Burt Reynolds had been working together to service an extremely willing Britney Spears. Working from either end of the undulating pop songstress, Lovinger and Burt had swapped a victorious high-five before his alarm clock had yanked him out of it and back into the real world. Not a bad dream at all, as dreams go.

No response from Acheson. Lovinger lifted the mic again, freezing when something thumped against the outside of the LAV. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Blair replied with a quiet snort. Another thump, this time from a different direction. Something was out there, circling the LAV. Lovinger still held the microphone gripped tightly in front of his holding the face, afraid to move. Realizing he was key down, he eased his thumb away.

"Blair?" Lovinger tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry. "Are you awake, buddy?"

"No."

The unexpected sound of Blair's voice caused Lovinger to start, slamming his wounded leg into the LAV's dash. He winced at the pain, but held in the groan that struggled to escape

"Why you wakin' me up?" Blair mumbled.

Breathing hard, Lovinger looked back towards the other Operator. "I think there's someone outside the LAV," he whispered.

"It's Jason Voorhees, no doubt," Blair said, rolling over onto his side.

"I'm not kidding," Lovinger said, raising himself to his feet and starting back towards the crew compartment.

Something clanged against the nose of the LAV. Lovinger stopped in his tracks. What would make a clanging sound like that? A machete, maybe? There it was again. Lovinger felt his heart crawling up into his throat. Come on, man. You're a bad-ass strike team Operator. An elite killer. Get a hold of yourself... And your gun. Forcing himself to move, Lovinger limped his way back into the crew compartment, where he retrieved his machine-gun. Whatever was circling the LAV thumped against it on the passenger side, this time rocking it slightly. Shit, Lovinger thought. He eased himself into a crouch alongside the bench that Blair lay on. "Blair."

Nothing

"Blair." Still holding his gun, Lovinger used his free hand to shake the sleeping Operator. "Blair, wake up, man. There's someone outside."

Suddenly, the LAV rocked violently as something slammed against the side of the vehicle. The motion spilled Lovinger onto his ass, sending a surge of pain through his gunshot leg. His machine gun

clattered loudly to the floor of the transport.

Blair's head snapped up. "What the fuck, man. Settle down!"

"You've gotta get up," Lovinger urged. "Jason Voorhees is outside the fucking LAV!"

Blair pushed himself up slightly, his head lolling sleepily. "Dude, what's he going to do, chew through the armor plating? You have got to relax."

The LAV was rocked by another violent blow. Blair was flung from the bench, landing painfully atop Lovinger on the floor. Painful for Lovinger, at any rate; Blair couldn't feel much of anything.

"All right, I changed my mind—we have to go out there and shoot the son of a bitch," Blair said. At that, the LAV began crazily swaying back and forth, as if someone were standing at the front end and shaking it.

"Jesus Christ!" Lovinger howled as Blair's limp body flopped across his wounded leg a second time. He shoved the morphine-addled Operator away and pulled himself free, crawling backwards towards the front of the LAV. The vehicle continued to rock, the motion growing more and more violent all the time. "I can't fucking take this!"

From his position face down on the floor, Blair looked up at Lovinger. "I told you, he can't get in! All we have to do is ride out the storm, he's bound to get bored and go away sooner or later!"

"No," Lovinger said. "No, no, no. I'm not putting up with this shit." He struggled against the swaying of the LAV to reach his fallen machine-gun.

"What are you doing?" Blair was trying to lift himself back to the bench, but wasn't getting very far.

Using his rifle to steady himself, Lovinger got a grip on one of the benches and began the agonizingly challenging task of raising himself up on his feet. The shaking of the LAV slammed his wounded leg against the edge of the bench, forcing a pained grunt from the man.

"What are you doing?" Blair asked again.

"I'm going to make him stop," Lovinger said. Like a sailor walking the deck in a gale, he began picking his way towards the front of the LAV—and the driver's hatch.

"Don't you open that hatch!" Blair was crawling uselessly after Lovinger in a pathetic attempt to stop the man. Lovinger reached the hatch, shooting a look back at Blair.

"Don't you fucking do it!"

Lovinger unlocked the hatch.

"You're gonna get us both killed!" Blair shouted.

Ignoring him, Lovinger shoved the hatch open. The rocking of the LAV suddenly eased a little, then came to a sudden rest.

Lovinger looked back at Blair again, smiling. "See? He stopped..."

Blair watched as a pair of ragged arms thrust downwards through

the driver's hatch, the decaying hands clamping down over Lovinger's head. The Operator screamed as he was hauled out of the hatch, his neck snapping and his feet kicking as they disappeared completely. Blair lay still on the floor listening as Lovinger's screams became manic and were then silenced. The LAV rocked one more time, then settled. A moment passed.

Blair stared up at the open hatch. "Lovinger?" he managed to croak. "Lovinger, you've gotta get back in here before..." His voice trailed away. He listened as someone moved around atop the vehicle.

Then Jason Voorhees thrust his head down through the open hatch, his ghastly yellow eyes glaring at Blair. Then the terrible face disappeared again. As he frantically dragged himself to the rear of the vehicle, Blair tried to tell himself that someone as big as Jason would never fit through that hatch. But he knew better. The opening was built so that someone in full combat gear could easily make it through.

Blair stared on in stark horror as Jason's legs slid through the opening and the killer lowered his bulk into the LAV, his blood-smeared machete clinking loudly off the edge of the hatch. Blair fought the urge to glance around for a way out. What was the point? He had nowhere to go. As he watched Jason Voorhees slowly make his way to where he lay, cowering in fear, Blair had the time for one last thought: at least with all the morphine in his system, he wouldn't feel a thing.

***

There were no bodies.

Hobb and the rest of the strike team had taken up positions on either side of the dirt road, just before the point where it widened out into the parking area at Camp Crystal Lake. Kelly and Meredith were close to Hobb, ducked down behind some thick underbrush. Holding his field glasses sideways to peer through them with his one good eye, Hobb surveyed the situation. No bodies. The good, God-fearing folk of the Ministry of the Heavenly Vessel had cleaned up their mess. The only evidence that remained of the firefight was the bullet-riddled school bus and the two other trucks, both of which had taken some damage. And, of course, the numerous bullet hits and grenade damage visible on the main cabin. A wave of anger threatened to overwhelm Hobb. The bastards had stolen the body of his best friend. Killing these cocksuckers will be a pleasure, he thought. Hobb fought it down. Can't just go in with guns blazing, despite the circumstances. Oh sure, doing would be monumentally satisfying, but it would also guarantee him a one-way ticket to that very lonely jail cell in that very deep hole somewhere beneath the Agency's headquarters.

Through the field glasses, he watched, Mr Tattoos, the ex-con or ex-biker he'd seen when the team first arrived, walk around the corner of

the main cabin, carrying a hunting rifle. He disappeared behind the school bus, then reappeared a moment later to lean against the porch railing. The guy had a pair of night vision goggles hanging around his neck, obviously taken from one of the fallen Operators. There were no other church folk visible at the moment, but Hobb was certain they were out there, ready to start slinging lead. Hobb handed the binoculars to Kelly and nodded towards the porch. "Is that Rickles?" he whispered.

As Kelly lifted the binoculars to her eyes, Meredith craned her neck, trying to see.

"You keep your head down," Hobb told the girl.

Sheepishly, Meredith ducked down again. Kelly squinted into the binoculars for a moment, then lowered them and looked at Hobb, shaking her head. "Don James," she said softly.

"Military?"

"Biker, I think."

Hobb nodded, taking the binoculars back from her. Almost as bad. A short, bird-like whistle caught his attention. Hobb glanced over to where Leonard was tucked down behind a tree. The man gave him a quick hand signal. Lifting his field glasses to his eye once again, Hobb looked in the direction Leonard had indicated. Nothing. He looked towards Leonard for confirmation. The man repeated the signal. Shrugging, Hobb took another look, but still saw nothing.

Then someone moved past the window upstairs. The room was dark, but there was no doubt about it.

"Who's in the upstairs room, on the right?" Hobb whispered to Kelly.

"Uh... the right..." He could see her running the floor plan in her head, trying to recall. "That's Father Long's room, I think. Or maybe Rickles's."

Good enough. Taking out either one of those two would probably bring a quick end to all this. "You two get back, now," he told Kelly and Meredith. "Stay low. Find the fattest trees you can and fold yourselves up behind 'em, then stay there until I say move."

"But what if—" Kelly started.

Hobb cut her off and pointed back into the woods. "Do it. Now!"

He watched until Kelly and Meredith had both found hiding places and were out of sight. Then he signaled to his strike team. Each one of them was focused on their own area of responsibility. Each one was pissed off and looking for revenge. And each one was armed to the teeth with some seriously hardcore weaponry.

Time to get this show on the road.

Hobb sucked in a deep breath. Diplomacy first. Asskicking afterwards. "Father Eric Long!" he shouted.

Instantly, Don James raised his rifle and crouched behind a post,

lifting his stolen night vision goggles to his eyes. There was more movement from various places around the perimeter of the campground, giving away the positions of Jesus-freaks with guns. Probably at least one more with night vision, Hobb reminded himself.

"Father Long, you and your followers are ordered to surrender and hand over your weapons immediately!" Hobb yelled.

On the porch, Don James's head swiveled. A good sign, Hobb thought. At least he hadn't made anyone's position yet. Hobb watched the tattooed biker for a second. The man looked uncertain, like maybe he didn't want to be there. Well, it was his tough luck. Pick a better church next time, asshole. Lifting his FN MK46, Hobb drew a bead dead center on the man's forehead. Watching this guy's brains come out would be so sweet, he thought. But of course he couldn't do that. Not yet, anyway.

"You have three minutes to begin complying with these orders!" Hobb shouted.

"Or what?"

Hobb instantly snapped the barrel of his machine gun towards that upstairs window. Father Long stood framed there, his pale, naked torso creating a perfect target against the darkness behind him. Not rising to the bait, Hobb instead counted down in his head. "Two minutes, thirty seconds!" He wanted so badly to shoot the son of a bitch. Silence. Then... laughter?

Hobb lowered the rifle and sighted down on Long through the field glasses. The piece of shit was up there laughing, like this was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. Can't kill him yet, can't kill him yet, Hobb repeated to himself.

Father Long's laughter slowly trailed away. Hobb continued to watch Long as the preacher spoke again. "And then what? When that time is up, you'll storm the castle?"

Hobb shifted the binoculars back to Don James. The guy was still scanning the area with the night vision, still unsure where any of the Operators were located. On the other hand, Hobb knew that at least two guns were trained on the biker, ready to take him out should he make the slightest threatening move. He returned his attention to Father Long

"Two minutes!" Hobb called out. He watched as Long's head darted towards the sound of his voice, trying like hell to pinpoint his position. Hobb knew he was in good shape when Long looked somewhere off to his right to deliver his answer.

"Surely you don't want another Waco on your hands?"

Holy Christ, did that sound familiar. Hobb hissed through his teeth. If there was one thing he was sick of hearing about, it was the Waco massacre. "It won't be another Waco, because one way or another, this

will be over in less than an hour," Hobb shouted.

Bad idea to let the man get to him. Father Long's head snapped towards him, but Hobb could see the preacher still wasn't quite sure where the voice was coming from. Don't be a fuck-up. Not this time. Lowering the field glasses to get a look at the entire scene, Hobb caught a glimpse of someone dashing from around the side of the main cabin to duck into the trees on the lake side. He brought the binoculars up again, searching the shadows there. There was definitely movement, but not enough light to make out the figure. If whoever it was would just keep shifting around until he stepped into a patch of moonlight, then bingo. Was this the notorious Mr Rickles? He had the standard-issue jarhead haircut and was ugly as hell, but that didn't automatically make him an ex-Marine. Hobb knew plenty of ugly guys with bad haircuts.

"One minute, thirty seconds!" Hobb shouted. He clucked a signal to Stilton, who was nearest. When he had the Operator's attention, he gestured toward the saltylooking dude hiding in the shadows, making certain that someone was training a gun on him. Then he put the binoculars back on Long.

"Come on now, be reasonable. How can you expect to defeat those who were chosen by God?" the preacher shouted, his eyes still flicking back and forth, searching for Hobb.

The clock was ticking down fast. Time to work the diplomatic angle again. They'd only be able to zero Hobb, anyway. "By killing them, if you force us to," he yelled. "But I don't think any of us want that."

Father Long's gaze settled into a spot very close to where Hobb was hunkered down. The preacher smiled broadly. "Now why is it I have a hard time believing that?"

"Nobody wants any more bloodshed. You can end this without any more violence, Long. Like a true man of God. Have your people, all of them, women and children included, step out here and put down their weapons."

"So you can cut them down and slaughter them like animals?" Long snapped.

Hobb had heard it all before. The crazy bastard was trying to rile up his followers with that kind of talk, get them hungering for blood, all in the name of defending themselves. This wasn't looking good, not at all. "No. So we can settle this peacefully," Hobb answered.

Long's face split in that creepy goddamn smile again. "There is no peace except within the bosom of the Lord," the preacher said, spreading his arms wide.

Don't change the subject, Hobb wanted to say. He looked from side to side. Tree on the left; good cover there. He didn't want to be sitting behind a shrub when the bullets started flying. He glanced back

towards the trees where Kelly and Meredith were hiding. Hobb hoped they had the sense to stay put, not panic and do something stupid.

Steadying himself, Hobb shouted to Long again. "Your time is up!"

Father Long stared towards Hobb for a long time, then spoke quietly. "Only God Himself can decide that." He looked down towards the trees, where the ugly guy had ducked into hiding. Hobb saw the preacher give a slight, almost regal nod.

Then hell opened up.

EIGHTEEN

As gunfire erupted from hidden positions around the campground, Hobb thought he heard a woman scream. He hoped like hell it wasn't Kelly or Meredith, but he couldn't afford to look back in their direction right then. Putting the sound out of his mind, he fired six rounds through the window Long had disappeared back into.

The bullets smashed through the glass and tore up the window frame, throwing chunks of wood into the air. The other Operators were raining lead on their areas of responsibility. Hobb saw Stilton throw some 5.56 caliber persuasion into the trees where he thought Rickles might be hiding. The church members were returning fire, and from the muzzle flashes lighting up the night over there, they obviously outnumbered the strike team by at least two-to-one. Hobb heard the woman scream again. No, two women. Definitely Kelly and Meredith. He whirled, his back against the tree trunk. A dozen feet away, seemingly oblivious to the gunfire whizzing past her, Meredith was on her feet in the open, backing towards the lake and screaming her head off. Hobb could only see Kelly's legs—she was down on the ground, mostly obscured behind a tree—but even through the ear-splitting racket of the gun battle, he could hear her screaming.

And with good reason: Jason Voorhees was advancing on her

Noon and Marr had done some damage to the massive killer—his entire torso was a ravaged, bloodied wound—but Jason was moving as if it were nothing more than an insect bite.

"Meredith, get the hell out of there!" he shouted.

The terrified girl looked towards him.

"Run like crazy!" Hobb yelled, waving her off.

She scurried away over the rise and headed towards Crystal Lake.

Hobb put a few rounds into the killer's chest, distracting him for an instant.

"Kelly! MOVE!"

She didn't. At least not in the way Hobb had meant. Jumping to his feet, he raced towards the tree she cowered behind. A slug tore into the tree trunk as he reached it, throwing splinters of bark into his face. He yelped, in surprise more than from pain, quickly wiping at his good eye. He couldn't afford to lose it, since he didn't have a spare.

Jason was only five or six yards away and coming on strong.

Hobb grabbed Kelly's arm and yanked the woman to her feet, screaming into her horrified face. "When I shoot the bastard, you run like hell!"

"Where?"

"Doesn't matter—just get the fuck outta here!" Hobb whipped his rifle towards Jason and put another burst of stinging lead into the

madman, irritating him more than slowing him down.

Kelly took off running, rapidly melting into the shadows of the forest. Before Hobb could fire another shot, Jason was on him. The machete whipped towards his face. Throwing himself backwards, Hobb felt the blade slide past his left cheek, heard it sink into the tree with a loud *thunk*. Off balance, he stumbled back and fell into the dirt, landing painfully. Looking up at his attacker, Hobb saw Jason roughly twist the machete, freeing the blade from the tree trunk and leaving a four-inch-deep notch behind. Jason raised the weapon over his head and came at Hobb, preparing for another strike. Frantically, Hobb crab-walked backwards. Another bullet punched into the ground inches away from him. Too goddamn much to think about.

The machete swung down on him.

Hobb rolled to the left. The blade caught the back of his right shoulder, going through his coveralls and shaving off a neat slice of muscle. Hobb shrieked in agony and kept rolling, leaving a trail of blood, until he was on his belly about five feet away from Jason. The killer was already coming at him again, rheumy yellow eyes blazing at him. Hobb twisted, firing a three-round burst into the unreasoning monster. It was a waste of ammo. Hurling himself to his feet, he ducked past another swipe of the machete and lurched away, trying to buy himself some fighting room. Behind the brawl, the gun battle continued to rage. None of the other Operators were aware of the situation their commanding officer was in—trapped in the open, sandwiched between gun-slinging religious fanatics and the machete-wielding, unstoppable lunatic they believed was some kind of savior. But Hobb suddenly found himself in possession of a very interesting idea. It would probably get him killed, but then again, there wasn't much that wouldn't.

Jason was bearing down on him rapidly. He's a torpedo in a hockey mask, Hobb thought. Hurriedly staggering backwards so he could keep an eye on the raging psychopath, he slammed up against a nearby tree hard enough to knock the wind out of himself. It hurt like hell, but at least he had cover from the gunfire for the moment. His shoulder was throbbing painfully and he could feel blood streaming down his back inside his coveralls. Sucking air, he slung his rifle over his uninjured shoulder and unholstered his sidearm. When the MK46 didn't make an impression on the bastard, there was no point in wasting its ammo for what he had in mind. He just needed something to keep Jason interested. Which, currently, did not seem to be a problem. The maniac lunged at Hobb, his massive arm driving the machete blade towards Hobb's chest in an attempt to pin him to the tree. Hobb spun away wildly, avoiding the machete but putting himself into the open again. He glanced around, found the nearest Operator.

"Garb!" Hobb shouted, desperate to be heard over the noise of the gun battle. "GARB!"

Garb looked back just in time to see his commanding officer dodge another swipe of the machete. If Hobb could have seen the man's eyes behind his night vision goggles, he would have seen them widen as in cartoons. Garb swung his machine-gun to bear on Jason and squeezed the trigger. The bullets thudded into the immense killer's body to little effect.

"Don't waste the ammo!" Hobb stumbled away from Jason, slinging blood from his wounded shoulder. He shouted at Garb again, gesturing towards the campground. "Give me some covering fire! When I get about ten feet past you, start leap-frogging!"

Garb nodded sharply. Turning, he laid down some lead in the direction of the church folk. Hobb's stomach twisted itself up. Cold sweat was pouring down his face, stinging his bad eye and making it hard to see out of the good one. He risked a look back towards the cabins. At least two bullets zinged past him, one of which punched into Jason's gut, spewing a crimson jet of blood. The killer glanced down at the wound, then returned his attention to Hobb. This was never going to work, he thought. Jason lunged for him again, the machete slicing through the air. Hobb jumped to avoid the attack. Hit the ground running, backwards, and into the oncoming gunfire. And Jason was still coming after him.

"That's it, ugly motherfucker. Come and get me!" Hobb yelled at Jason. He passed Garb, who was crouched a few feet to his right, then ducked behind another tree. Jason slowed, eyeing Garb, whose attention was focused on keeping a steady suppressing fire on the church folk. The madman raised his machete and started towards the oblivious Operator.

Oh shit. "GARB!" Hobb screamed to be heard over the man's FN MK46. "Get the hell out of there!"

Garb turned just as Jason was about to strike. "Holy FUCK!" he screeched, jumping to his feet and scrambling forwards.

Hobb raised his sidearm and put a round into Jason's chest. As expected, it did nothing to stop the murderous juggernaut. It did, however, draw him off Garb and back towards Hobb. "That's it... That's it," Hobb coaxed. He risked a glance around the tree, back towards the church. Winced as he saw Hurley go down, blood spouting from his face. He looked back. Jason was closing in. Ten feet. Five... Hobb took off running again, leap-frogging Garb's position. "Watch your ass!" he yelled as he passed the man this time. Hobb ducked behind a much thinner tree. He was running out of cover as he got closer to the campground's parking area. The direct approach wasn't going to work. If he was going to avoid getting shot, he'd have to stay along the tree

line and circle the parking area. That was fine. The direct approach didn't matter. All I have to do is lead Jason to those Jesus-freaks and hope that he'll start cutting down the goddamn sinners. As far as Hobb was concerned, that meant every last one of the assholes. With any luck, it would be like dropping a shark into a swimming pool on a hot Saturday afternoon.

Garb leap-frogged Hobb's position. Dropping into a crouch, he grunted loudly as a bullet slammed into his chest, knocking him backwards.

"Shit!" Hobb left the cover of the tree and ran to Garb's side.

The Operator was writhing on the ground, gritting his teeth and swearing. His Kevlar vest had stopped the bullet, but the impact had still delivered a punishing blow. A frag grenade went off in the trees, over towards the lake, startling Hobb. He tumbled back on his ass, looking towards the explosion in time to see what appeared to be a disembodied hand hit the ground with a gruesome splat.

Hobb wondered who it belonged to. Garb made a weird sound, getting Hobb's attention. He looked at the Operator, who was on his back, grimacing in pain and pointing at something behind Hobb...

Hobb looked back and dodged away in one motion. Jason's machete came down in the dirt, nearly cutting into Hobb's leg. Whipping his pistol upwards, Hobb fired a shot into Jason's throat. That one shook the killer, at least a little. Blood spurted from his neck and he reeled back, slapping a hand over the spurting wound. Hobb was already on his feet. Taking hold of Garb's bulletproof vest, he turned his back on the man and started dragging him back into the trees and out of the line of fire. Then Hobb's movement was stopped so suddenly it nearly yanked him backwards off his feet.

Whirling, he saw Jason leaning over Garb's limp body, the machete sunk clean through his chest and into the ground, pinning him down. Slowly, the killer raised his masked head to glower at Hobb. Howling with anger, Hobb released his grip on Garb's vest and bolted for cover. Jason wrenched the machete from Garb's torso and stared at the blood dripping from the blade. Then he turned and calmly surveyed the assortment of victims spread out before him.

***

After the initial burst of gunfire that had chased him back away from the window, only a slug or two had found its way into Father Long's room. Still, as much he would have loved to watch the battle unfold, he thought it prudent to hang back from the window a bit. He was sure that God would call him home soon, but he didn't want to needlessly hurry things along. So he stood at the foot of the bed, eyes closed, stark naked, and listened. He listened to the firecracker bursts of machine-

gun fire, the throaty growl of shotguns, the reverberating crack of hunting rifles. And the screams of pain, of course. The screams were the sopranos of this grotesque opera. They didn't come often, but when he heard one, a glorious shiver ran up Long's naked spine. Sadly, the pleasure of the performance was marred by the whimpering cries of his wives. Father Long opened his eyes and looked towards the three women, huddled in the farthest corner, where they cowered like pathetic children. "Get out," Long commanded.

The women merely looked at him, their tear-sodden eyes bulging in horror.

"I said get out," he repeated, striding towards the women. He didn't seem to notice the bullet that punched through the window, zipping past him to impact the opposite wall.

Incredibly, Susanna Bookwalter was the one with the courage to speak up. "But... there's nowhere to—"

"OUT!" Long screamed. He stomped to where the women huddled together, grabbing Christine's arm and hurling her roughly toward the door. She slammed into the wall and fell to the floor.

"Why are you doing this?" Christine shrieked, tears running down her face. A trickle of blood ran from her left nostril.

Father Long kicked at her, snarling. She screamed and fumbled for the doorknob, yanking the door open and crawling out into the hallway. Behind her, Long violently herded the remaining women out of the room. The preacher slammed the door behind them, heaving a sigh of relief. He realized he was aroused. And it was painful, too. He clasped the bulge in his hand, admiring it. After comforting his three wives, two separate times... not bad. But it was wrong to experience such sensations right then. Long stared at his bulge, trying to will it to shrivel away, but still it protruded defiantly from his crotch.

Long looked up as another scream filled the air. This one was close, perhaps just below his window. Another of his flock, proving his faith with the ultimate sacrifice. He continued to stare towards the window, hoping that when he looked back, his erection would have waned. It was fruitless, though; he could feel the thing's cyclopean gaze peering up at him, demanding his attention. Not deigning to look at his tormentor, Long crossed the room to the foot of the bed. Crouching—and feeling the damned thing move awkwardly, beckoning to him—he reached under the bed and slid a small wooden box from beneath it. The box was about twenty inches long, eight inches wide, and only about five inches high. Its surface was colored with a dark reddish stain.

But it wasn't locked. It was never locked. One never knew when its contents might be required, after all, and the added time involved in retrieving the key could make all the difference. Of course, Father Long

had never before had need for the item, a fact he took great pride in. Long flipped open the two hasps that held the lid closed, glancing at his crotch as he did so. Soon, he warned the thing silently. You'll learn when such behavior is appropriate and when it isn't. Slowly, he raised the lid of the box. Inside was a small whip with numerous thin, black leather tentacles snaking out from the handle: a cat-o'-nine-tails. With both hands, he lifted the whip from the box reverently. He gripped the handle firmly in his right hand, sliding the leather strips through his left. As the strips fell away, they left trails of blood across the palm of his hand. Sucking air through his clenched teeth, Father Long examined the ragged slits that marred the flesh of his palm, then held up the whip, gazing at its glistening tentacles. Each leather strip was studded with tiny slivers of broken glass.

On his knees, Long turned to face the broken window and raised his eyes to the heavens. "For you, Lord. For my sins." Then he whipped the leather ribbons over his right shoulder and across his bare back, gasping as the glass tore through his skin. As he agonizingly slid the straps upwards over his shoulder again, he glanced down at his erection.

Yes. The terrible thing was finally beginning to diminish.

The glass-encrusted lashes bit into his flesh again with a wet snap, peeling skin from the meat underneath. Rivulets of blood trailed down Long's back, mixing with his sweat and dripping to the wooden floor. The preacher shuddered in frightful rapture.

Outside, men continued to die for him.

NINETEEN

Out of breath, and with a stitch in her side that felt like a knife had been jabbed through her ribs, Kelly finally stopped running. She leaned against a tree, panting, afraid to look back. She didn't have to. It sounded like a *Rambo* movie back there, gunfire and explosions tearing the night apart. It occurred to her that she was probably the safest person out there. Long's followers had their hands full with Hobb's Operators, and Jason Voorhees was in the middle of it all. She could probably lie down on the ground and take a nap if she wanted to. Unless things had gotten too hot for Jason and he was searching for her right now, looking for a nice soft target to sink that machete into.

Or maybe he was looking for Meredith.

She had caught a glimpse of the girl running towards the lake, but with Jason stomping towards her she really hadn't been able to concern herself with Meredith's welfare. Pressing matters, as they say. Kelly looked back towards Crystal Lake. Flashes of light filtered through the trees as guns went off, but that was all she could see. She wondered if Hobb was okay, or even still alive. What should I do? Going back to the campground was out of the question, but she sure as hell didn't want to stand around in the woods, in the dark, and just wait. Two of Hobb's men were still with the wrecked LAVs, back at the main road. Surely it would be safe there?

Forcing herself to move, Kelly started running again.

***

Down in the trees near the edge of Crystal Lake, Meredith was on her knees, curled in a ball on the damp ground with her hands clasped over her ears.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," the girl muttered over and over again, rocking slightly. It was all too much; it was making her crazy. She had run away from Kelly, just like Kelly had run away from her, and the guilt was eating holes through her guts. She had no idea if her best friend was alive or dead. Why won't they stop shooting at each other? She couldn't see anything from where she was, but she could hear people yelling and screaming and dying. Suddenly, Meredith flung her head back and shrieked at the top of her lungs: "It's supposed to be a church!" Sobbing, she watched the gunfire light up the night. "It's supposed to be a church," she repeated, softly this time.

Meredith never wanted to hate anyone, but at that moment her heart burned with such intense hatred for Father Long it threatened to swallow her up. She thought she might even be able to kill him herself, given the opportunity. No, don't think like that. Don't let him turn you into something horrible. Something like him. She lowered her head to the ground again, resting it on her clenched fists. She knew she should

run away, find someplace to hide, safe from Father Long and the others. And Jason. Hobb was right. Jason Voorhees was no instrument of the Lord. He was a monster. Nothing more.

She jumped as a loud wolf-whistle split the night, close enough to be audible over the terrible sounds of the gun battle. Meredith's head snapped around and she squinted into the darkness.

Mr Rickles was standing a few yards away, a shaft of moonlight illuminating his repulsive, toothless face. "I see your hiney, it's bright and shiny," he sang, pointing at her.

Gasping, Meredith raised up, quickly grabbing at the hem of the T-shirt Hobb had given her and tugging it down to cover herself.

Rickles stepped towards her, limping a little and grinning that awful, wormy grin. "You've got no pants on, girl. And bein' bent over like that..." he shook his head, feigning scorn. "Don't you see that's like an open invitation to a man? Maybe you need to be taught a lesson, learn not to do things like that lest it lead others into temptation, you know what I mean?"

Meredith rose to her feet, stretching the end of her shirt down. "You stay away from me."

The ex-Marine's lip curled in amusement. "I have to say, it was a real nice show, though. I wouldn't mind seeing it again."

He reached towards her shirt and Meredith backed away from him. "No! I said keep away! Don't touch me!"

Mr Rickles fixed her with a stern look. "A girl shouldn't speak like that to the man who's gonna be her husband. If we're going to have a life together, you'd better show some respect."

"I hate you!" Meredith shouted.

"Now, little darlin'..." Rickles's lip curled, revealing his pink gums. They were bleeding, as if he had sunk his lower teeth into them. "Don't make me take my hand to you," he said, stepping closer to her. "'Cause I have no qualms about whipping that pretty little ass of yours until it's rosy red. In fact, maybe I ought to just go ahead and do that. It's very obvious you need to be taught some manners... And as your future husband, I suppose that duty falls to me."

She slapped him across the face, her palm stinging from the force of the blow. "Maybe you need to learn a thing or two. I said don't you touch me."

Rickles slid his hand down his cheek, his eyes flaring in anger. "I think that just about settles it," he said.

Meredith tried to break and run, but the ex-Marine caught the back of her shirt, ripping the fabric at the shoulder and reeling her in like a squirming fish. Screaming, she struggled ferociously, but Rickles's strong arms soon closed around her in a tight embrace.

"Don't you understand I'm fighting for you up there?" he whispered

into her ear. "Risking my life for you so we can have a decent future?"

"Let me go!" She kicked at him viciously, trying to stomp his bad foot, but couldn't get enough leverage to do any good.

"Don't be like that. I love you, baby," Rickles said, nuzzling Meredith's neck. "Like my sweetest own girl."

Meredith strained against his grip, thrashing violently. She felt his hand sliding down her belly.

Then his fingers found the place she had prayed he'd never go.

***

Hobb's plan to drag Jason Voorhees into the battle and turn him loose on the church folk would have been a good one, if not for a small hitch. The son of a bitch was slaughtering God-lovers and Operators alike. Like a killer robot on autopilot, Jason had finished his business with the unfortunate Garb and simply waded into the sea of potential victims, cutting them down like blood-spewing stalks of wheat.

The strike team in particular, preoccupied with pinning down and shooting the attacking church members, were completely unprepared when the machete-swinging maniac strolled into their midst. Hobb had seen Stilton's head come off, dribbling blood as it rolled across the ground, and soon afterwards Leonard had lost an arm before having his chest hacked open. Always one to be even-handed, Jason had taken out at least that many members of Long's congregation so far.

After Garb had bought it, Hobb ducked behind a tree, where he drew his knife and cut away part of the left leg of his coveralls. Tearing the fabric into strips, he used it to bandage his bleeding shoulder as best he could. The shit was hitting the fan in a major way. He wouldn't be much good to anyone if he was passing out from blood loss. The makeshift bandage really didn't seem to be making a whole hell of a lot of difference, however; blood was still oozing from the wound with every beat of his heart, running down his back and soaking his coveralls. He wasn't going to be able to function much longer without taking care of the wound. Wincing, he reached back to lift the bandage slightly and peer at his shoulder. There was so much blood he couldn't see exactly how bad it was, but he knew one thing: Jason had really done a number on him.

Releasing the bandage, Hobb turned and gazed out across the parking area, towards the main cabin. Father Long hadn't poked his head out since before the shooting started, but Don James was still back there behind the school bus, slinging lead from the big hunting rifle he carried. At the moment, Jason was nowhere to be seen. Had he gotten tired of hacking apart fish in a barrel and wandered off into the forest? Hobb wondered if Jason ever got tired of killing people, or if, given an endless supply, he'd just keep slaughtering until there was no

one left. Not a bad weapon, if you could figure out a way to leash him.

And what about Rickles? If that really had been the ex-Marine he saw duck into the trees earlier, then Hobb needed to get over there, try to take the guy out. At this point, he doubted that killing Rickles would have much effect on the fighting. He just knew it was something he'd like to do. But finding Rickles meant getting across the parking area, and it was alive with gunfire from all directions. There was a marginal amount of cover available in the form of the two trucks and the school bus, but that would put him awfully close to the main cabin, and in a crossfire between the three Operators he had left and the church members. Only three men left. Holy shit. Hobb wasn't sure what kind of numbers they were facing in terms of religious folk, but there was nowhere near as much gunfire coming from that direction now as there had been. Whether the Jesus-freaks were dying or simply running out of ammo, he couldn't say. Hobb had one magazine in his FN MK46, and he'd fired at least a couple dozen rounds from that gun. He just had the one clip for his sidearm, as well. He was going to have to stock up.

He scanned the parking area, his eyes settling on the ravaged corpse of Leonard. The body lay about ten yards from Hobb's current position, and twice that back from the nearest truck. Holstering his sidearm, Hobb lifted his machine-gun and took a couple of deep breaths. Then he raced out into the open, running in a low crouch. Someone took a shot at him, the slug hitting near his feet and kicking up a spray of dirt. Almost there. He heard an odd whirring sound as another bullet slid by his head, punching into the ground a few feet past him on the left. It was apparent that whoever was shooting at him wasn't going to make this easy.

Twisting as he ran, Hobb unleashed a burst of fire from his rifle, not aiming at anything in particular but trying to put some fear into whoever was drawing down on him. He tried to skid as he came up next to Leonard's body, but the moist ground clung to the rubber soles of his boots and he went down in a heap, landing atop the dead Operator. Quickly rolling off the body, Hobb found himself smeared with Leonard's still-warm blood. "Aw, shit." Leonard lay on his back, entrails bulging from the gaping wound that ran from the middle of his chest almost to his groin.

A bullet slammed into Leonard's guts, splattering Hobb's face with more blood. Snarling, Hobb fired a few rounds in response, this time singling out the front end of the school bus. He could wait for the guy to fire again and pinpoint the shooter by the muzzle flash, but he might also take the slug, and that would be a bad end to an extremely shitty day. Clinging to the ground and trying to use the body for cover, Hobb reached across Leonard's split torso and dug through his vest pockets.

He came up with a couple magazines for the pistol, but nothing for the MK46. Leonard carried a shotgun. Shit, he thought. It's always something.

Leonard's arm suddenly jerked towards Hobb, a spout of blood gushing upwards from the biceps. Hobb's little church buddy had taken another shot at him, and he was getting closer with every round. Hobb hurled himself to his feet and ran for the nearest truck, the faded old International Scout. He considered slinging some lead towards the cabin, but without a definite target and after coming up empty-handed at Leonard's Dead Guy's Ammo Shop, he thought it better to save what he had until he could be sure of putting it through someone's face. Slamming into the right rear fender of the Scout, Hobb peeked up through the window. All of the glass had been shot out of the vehicle and the stuffing was torn up where bullets had hit the seats.

A wave of heat and flying debris came out of nowhere, shoving Hobb out into the open and throwing him painfully to the ground. Grenade. Too big to be one of the frags the Operators carried, he thought—Sisson must have decided it was time to bring the Milkor into the fight. As Hobb hurriedly crawled back into the cover of the Scout, another explosion lifted the rear end of the school bus six feet into the air. A carpet of flame spread out from the blast, sweeping beneath the Scout and scorching Hobb's hair.

"SISSON!" Hobb shouted. "Hold your fire, for Christ's sake!"

He saw the Operator break cover long enough to throw him the high sign, then duck back out of sight again. From his vantage point on the ground, Hobb could see a couple pairs of feet moving around behind the burning school bus. He would have wagered big that two of those feet belonged to Mr Tattoos himself. Hobb squeezed the trigger of his gun, sweeping it along the underside of the bus as he fired. One of the bastards back there got lucky and escaped the hail of lead without injury. The other man took a slug in the top of his left foot and another through his right ankle, shattering the bone and dropping him to the dirt. The flames pouring from the bus created a pattern of flickering shadows, but Hobb easily recognized Don James. Hard to mistake that cartoon-dog mustache. He fired again, watching as the bullets ripped into the tattooed biker, sending his body into a series of spastic breakdancing moves and putting him out of Hobb's misery.

Hobb turned when he heard a howl of pain from behind. He saw Chaffin stumbling from the trees, clutching at his face with bloodied fingers. He'd been shot through the lower jaw, and a stringy hunk of bone and meat dangled from his chin. As Hobb watched, a second bullet ripped into the man, hurling him to the ground, where he finally lay still. That leaves two.

If he was going to accomplish what he needed to, Hobb had to kill

that shooter. But where in the hell were the shots coming from? Getting to his feet, Hobb dashed out from behind the Scout, trying to create a tempting target. Keeping an eye on the cabin and the trees beyond, he ran towards the pickup truck. There, he saw a muzzle flash in the high branches of the tree that stood right next to the main cabin. The guy had probably clambered into the tree from the cabin's roof. Hobb hit the dirt rolling, came up on one knee behind the truck. His shoulder hurt and was still bleeding badly. If he took a second to think about it, he realized that he was starting to feel a little woozy, so he didn't think about it. All he wanted to do was get this over with and go home to Lauren.

There was movement to his right, on the porch, behind the school bus. Hobb leveled his machinegun at the man. *Not this time, asshole*. A three-round burst of 5.56 caliber slugs crunched into the guy, hammering him back against the front wall of the cabin. He slumped, oozing blood. The resistance from the church folk was weakening; scanning the area, Hobb only counted a couple of muzzle flashes, including the shooter up in the tree. Hell, it was almost quiet. How to get a clear shot at that guy perched in the branches, though? Blow the thing right the hell out of there, that's how. Hobb signaled to Sisson. When the stocky fellow popped up to look questioningly at his commanding officer, Hobb gestured towards the big tree. Sisson signaled back: I get it.

However, the Operator was going to have to break cover in order to place the grenade where it needed to go. Hobb counted three in his head, then he and Sisson exchanged a nod. As Sisson stepped into the open, Hobb unleashed a hail of lead into the tree to give him some cover. Sisson raised his Milkor grenade launcher, drawing a bead on the upper branches of the tree. Just before he pulled the trigger, he saw Jason Voorhees step from the shadows on his right, machete raised for the kill. The blade slammed into Sisson's chest just below his clavicle, cutting through his bulletproof vest and sinking into the flesh and bone beneath. The impact knocked Sisson backwards, bringing the muzzle of the Milkor straight up.

Hobb looked back just in time to see Sisson fire the Milkor into the air. The grenade sailed upwards and to the right a little, hanging in the air for a freakishly long moment. As it began to fall back towards the earth...

Moseley broke from his cover nearby, sprinting. He didn't get far. The 40mm grenades the Milkor fired only had about a five-meter kill radius. In this case, that was more than enough. The explosion ripped through Sisson and Moseley, sending chunks of flesh and bits of Kevlar flying in all directions. Hobb caught a quick glimpse of Jason's body tumbling back into the trees, then the flash from the explosion

momentarily blinded him. Hobb lay facedown in the dirt, breathing hard, as the dust and bits of meat settled. That was it. He was on his own now. And the sniper was still up in that tree.

But Hobb was royally pissed off and more than ready to do something about it. He jumped to his feet and sprinted towards the tree the shooter was perched in. It's a dumb move, he thought, real John Wayne shit. Hobb couldn't care less. The guy took a couple shots at Hobb, kicking up dirt around his feet. Hobb weaved back and forth a little, but kept on hauling his ass towards that tree. He wasn't worried about preserving his ammo anymore. As he neared the base of the tree, he began firing up into the branches and howling. slugs tore through the tree limbs, shredding branches big and small, and showering bark and leaves down on Hobb.

Somewhere up there, somebody screamed.

Hobb kept firing even as he watched the body tumble through the branches, bouncing violently and flipping like a rag doll before it slammed to the ground. Panting, Hobb approached the corpse and rolled it over with his foot. The guy's face was in pretty bad shape, but he was obviously young, and certainly not the man Hobb had thought to be Rickles.

Meaning the ex-Marine was very likely still hiding out there.

Hobb leaned against the tree for a moment, collecting himself. Nobody was shooting at him. It was an odd feeling. Silence had settled over Camp Crystal Lake again, except for the crackling of the flames as the school bus continued to burn.

Then, through the sound of the fire, barely loud enough to hear, came a soft girlish whimpering. Meredith? Pushing himself away from the tree trunk, Hobb raised his weapon and cautiously walked into the stand of trees that grew between Crystal Lake and the campground.

Hobb's stomach churned. He knew exactly what he was going to find.

TWENTY

Shoving through the sparse underbrush, Hobb stepped into a small clearing on the edge of the lake. He felt his face tighten in fury. The rough-looking guy that Hobb had seen earlier held Meredith down on the ground. Mr Fucking Rickles, formerly of the United States Marine Corps. And what he was doing would have made every Marine on the planet want to rip the son of a bitch's limbs from his body.

The T-shirt Hobb had given the girl was torn and wadded up across her midsection. Rickles trailed his nasty tongue across her stomach, while his hand pawed at her thighs. His pants were shoved down to expose his pimply ass. A hunting rifle lay in the dirt nearby. Meredith was crying.

"Rickles!" Hobb shouted, leveling his FN MK46 at the ex-Marine's back.

The man whirled, glaring at Hobb.

"Get up. Now."

A slow smile spread across Rickles's face, exposing his gums. The sight of his smile made Hobb want to puke. "I said get up." He gestured with the machine gun barrel. "Back away from the girl."

"She's my wife," Rickles said.

"She's seventeen."

Rickles shrugged. "Old enough to drive, old enough to drive to my house." He snickered at his little joke.

Hobb had never wanted to kill anyone so badly in all his life. Not even Jason Voorhees filled him with such loathing. Jason was just an animal, a force of nature. But this guy... Walking filth. "You're a goddamn disgrace, Rickles," Hobb snarled.

Rickles's squirrelly giggling trailed off. Staring at Hobb, he sighed. "All right," he said. Slowly, he pushed himself off of Meredith and got to his feet, pulling his pants up. "I guess you're not gonna let us have our fun..." His face split in that vile grin once more. "Unless, of course, you'd like to join us."

That was it. "Drop your weapon," Hobb hissed, his jaw clenched.

Rickles looked confused. "I don't have one... unless you're talking about my cock."

Hobb glanced at Meredith. She was staring at him, a pleading look in her eyes. Almost imperceptibly, she nodded to him.

Hobb's eyes flicked back to Rickles. "I said drop it."

"What the hell's wrong with your eyesight, buddy?" Rickles snapped. "I am unarmed..."

Meredith jumped at the sound of the gunshot.

Rickles's head came apart like an overripe melon as the slug punched into his face, just to the left of his nose. When his body dropped to the

ground, there wasn't much left above his neck. It was definitely an improvement.

Hobb finally released the trigger and lowered his gun. The MK46 was out of ammo; he had intended to put multiple rounds into the filthy son of a bitch, but the one shot he'd had left was all he really needed. Did the job, anyway. He started towards Meredith. Shuddering uncontrollably, the girl tore her gaze away from Rickles's corpse to stare at Hobb. Her nude body was speckled with bits of Rickles's skull and brain.

"It's okay," Hobb told her. He should've known better.

Jason Voorhees stepped into his path.

Hobb actually raised his machine gun again before remembering the situation. "Goddamn you!" he screamed at the masked maniac. "Haven't you had enough?"

Calmly, Jason turned towards Meredith.

"No!" Hobb yelled, drawing his sidearm.

He had time to note the look of serenity on the girl's face before the machete split it in two. Screaming in anguish, Hobb emptied his pistol into Jason's back. He might as well have been throwing peanuts at the killer. Meredith's body collapsed to the ground, blood spreading in a wide pool from the massive wound in her head. Jason flicked his machete, slinging gore from the blade. Hobb fought down the foolish urge to hurl himself into the murderer. Instead, as Jason slowly turned to face him...

He ran for all he was worth, his heart hammering in his chest. Breath coming in agonizing gasps, his sides aching. Not looking back, Hobb crashed through the trees and underbrush, branches whipping at his face. Finally, he burst from the trees and raced out into the carnage-strewn battleground at Camp Crystal Lake, where he skidded to a stop, spinning in place, taking it all in. Bodies lay everywhere, their shattered limbs given false movement by the flickering light from the burning school bus. The flames had spread to the main cabin, the roof over the porch burning out of control. Hobb roared his anger and frustration at the brutal scene spread before him.

Then Jason walked out of the trees, his yellow eyes burning with hate, merciless, tireless, driven by whatever hellish force invested him with the insatiable need to kill.

And Hobb ran.

***

Long awoke to an acrid odor. Smoke; something was on fire. The preacher was sprawled facedown on the floor of his room, the glass-encrusted flail just beyond his hand. He must have passed out somehow. The delicious pain, perhaps. He lay there unmoving, simply

listening for a time. The quiet confused him. Had the battle come to an end? If so, his followers must have driven away the soldiers a second time. If the soldiers had prevailed, they would have come for him, dragged him away to meet what they would have called justice. He was the leader of the faithful, after all. But if his flock had won the battle, why hadn't one of them come for him? Curtis Rickles or Don James? He sniffed at the air. Yes, something was definitely burning

As Long started to rise, pain erupted through his back. Forcing his way through it, he pushed himself up on all fours, staring down in surprise at the pool of blood beneath him. Was it any wonder he felt so weak? A flame licked past the window. The cabin was burning. His cabin. Long made it to his feet only by pulling himself up on the foot of the bed. Standing, he teetered dangerously. His head felt as if it had been injected full of thick oatmeal. Where were his wives? Oh, yes. They had left him. Ran away when he most needed their support. Well, he'd have to have a little talk with them, wouldn't he? Make them clear on their place in the scheme of things.

The flames had risen up beyond the window and were coming in through the broken glass, taste-testing the room. His nude body slicked with blood, Long stumbled for the door and out into the hall.

The front of the cabin was engulfed in flame. Intense heat hammered him as he staggered down the stairs, heading for the back door. It dimly occurred to Long that the building was empty. His followers had left him to die in the fire. It didn't matter, really, if his people had won or lost. It was all the same when their moment of judgment came, all the same in the eyes of the Lord. What mattered was defending their faith in Him and in Long. Obviously, they had failed bitterly on both counts. "Sinners," Long muttered as he lurched out the back door.

Stepping onto the back porch, he froze, staring across the grounds of Camp Crystal Lake. The pleasant summer retreat had become a killing field. Corpses, and pieces of corpses, littered the area between the main cabin and the smaller ones. Most noticeably, the savaged bodies of Long's three wives. He picked his way down the steps and wandered into the scene of carnage, approaching the dead women. Their flesh had suffered such damage that Long couldn't even be sure which was which. He knew Christine only by the hideous scar that traversed her belly, and even its path had been altered. Brutal, yes, but only what they deserved. The women shouldn't have scampered around like that, flagrantly insulting the Lord with their carnal nakedness.

Long continued, heading for the church. As he passed some of the family cabins, he could see bodies strewn carelessly in doorways and across the porches, no doubt cut down as they tried to escape their judgment. Blood decorated the walls and the earth itself. The good earth of Camp Crystal Lake. Long smiled wryly. His "faithful" followers

had met the Hand of God and were found lacking. A wrenching *crack* drew Long's attention. He looked back at the main cabin. More than half of it was now engulfed in the fire, and something had collapsed—the front porch, probably. Sparks and bits of burning debris drifted in the air above the building.

He walked up the steps to the church. The door was slightly ajar, and the interior was dark. Long hesitated for a moment before pushing the door open and stepping inside. Long sensed Jason's presence before he saw him. "I wish I'd known your mother," Long said, his voice hollow in the large cabin. At the head of the room, a massive figure shifted in the shadows. The moonlight filtering through a nearby window delineated the familiar contours of Jason's hockey mask. Long walked towards him. "She should be looked upon as a saint, you know. For bringing you into the world." Long paused a few feet away from Jason. "For birthing the Heavenly Vessel."

The Heavenly Vessel's dull eyes traveled the length of Father Long's body, finally settling on his face. Moonlight glinted off the machete as Jason lifted it slowly. Long stared at the blade, swallowing hard. He knew the time of his judgment was at hand. "I know I've sinned, in my life and in my heart," the preacher began, raising his hands, palms up in supplication. "But I've done my best to atone for those sins."

The machete blade continued its slow rise.

"First, through the creation of the ministry and the works I've done through that, in the Lord's name. And then through your resurrection." He lowered his head. "I can only offer those things, and the knowledge that I've acted out of love for God... and for you."

Apparently, that wasn't enough to settle the tab.

The machete sliced through the darkness, sinking into the left side of Father Long's head just below the ear, and coming to a stop just under his nose. The blade knocked several of Long's teeth from their sockets. His mouth filled with blood. Jason gripped the top of Long's head with his free hand and wrenched the blade loose. Long collapsed to his knees, looking up at Jason with the eyes of a dying animal. "Praise God in all his wisdom," the preacher mumbled through a mouthful of blood. The machete came down again, slicing deeply into Long's shoulder near his neck. When Jason tugged the blade free, the father fell forward onto the wooden floor. Jason rested his foot on the preacher's chest and brought the machete down through his collarbone, before hauling the blade back out. Then, the brutal killer lined up the father's chin with his blade, as if teeing off on the eighteenth, and sliced along Father Long's face, flesh striking the wall.

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Orange light was spilling over the horizon as Hobb reached the main

road and the wrecked LAVs. He'd run the entire distance at an insane sprint. He felt like battery acid was being pumped through his veins. An unusual sight brought him skidding to a halt at the edge of the two-lane blacktop. Kelly sat on the ground next to the transport that was still upright—the one they'd left Blair and Lovinger in—her legs apart as she played in the dirt. In her rumpled flower-print sundress, she looked like a sad little kid.

This was a bad sign. Hobb started to walk across the road, but couldn't make it. His legs felt like rubber and his chest was on fire from exhaustion. Bending, he rested his elbows on his knees and sucked air.

Kelly looked up at him curiously. "Where's Meredith?"

Hobb considered his response. If he shook his head, she might think he simply didn't know where the girl was, but he couldn't think of any way to say it that didn't hurt like hell. "She's dead," he finally settled on.

Kelly's face slowly fell in on itself and she exploded in quiet, gulping sobs.

Straightening, Hobb crossed the street. As he neared the LAV, he noticed the length of human intestine trailing out the open driver's hatch and the smear of blood on the armor plating. Not much need to ask about Blair and Lovinger, he supposed. *Damn*. And he had no clue whether or not they'd raised the Agency on the radio. He crouched next to Kelly, not sure how to proceed. Gently, he brushed her hair back from her face.

"It's my fault," she sniffed.

"How do you figure that?"

"She looked up to me, trusted me. I should've—"

Hobb interrupted her. "None of us knew what we were getting into out here. Don't try to take the blame. It'll just eat you up until you've got nothing left inside but guilt.

Sniffling, Kelly looked at him. "You're bleeding."

"I am?"

"Don't joke," she said, reaching out to gingerly touch his wounded shoulder. "It looks bad."

"Doesn't feel so hot, either."

She nodded towards the LAV. "These things carry a first aid kit, right? You should let me fix it up."

He shrugged her hand away, standing. "No time."

"You've lost a lot of blood and you're exhausted," she said.

"Maybe I'll have some orange juice later." He walked to the back of the LAV. The hatch was shut and locked.

"Do you ever take anything seriously?" Kelly asked, getting to her feet and smoothing her stained skirt.

Hobb fixed her with a stolid gaze. "Breakfast."

She let out a little snort of disdain.

Walking past her on his way to the front end of the LAV, Hobb paused. "I killed Rickles."

Kelly stared at him as he continued around the front of the vehicle. "They're dead." She started after him. "The soldiers—Operators, I mean. Your friends."

Hobb had clambered up on the nose of the transport and was peering in through the gore-slathered hatch. "I can see that."

"I'm sorry," she said.

Hobb looked at her. "So am I." With that, he took hold of the intestine, grimacing in disgust. He wondered if it was Blair's or Lovinger's.

"Oh my God," Kelly muttered, turning away.

"Yeah," Hobb said. "You might not want to watch this." He began tugging at the length of gut, pulling it out of the LAV and letting it drop to the dirt in front of the transport. Trying to clear the hatchway, struggling to hold down the bile rising in his throat, he glanced back to where the intestine trailed off into the trees. Which end was the body on? Hobb recalled hearing that these things were something like two or three miles long. He could be here all day.

Just as he was preparing to let fly with some puke, the end of the intestine came through the hatch. Assuming this meant the body was at the other end, he let the ropy gut drop with a moist *splat* and wiped his hands on his pants. He turned away and took a couple deep breaths.

"What are you doing, anyway?" Kelly asked, pressing her fist to her mouth.

Hobb positioned himself over the hatch. "I need some firepower." Then he dropped through, disappearing inside the vehicle.

The lights were on in the transport, but, as they say, nobody was home. Perched in the driver's seat, Hobb scoped out the situation. With all the blood splattered everywhere, it looked as if the Manson Family might have been the last occupants. Blair and Lovinger must've been sitting in there with the driver's hatch open for airflow, figuring Jason was too big to fit through. Or maybe the psycho had just come knockin' and they'd thought it was one of the team and opened up to say hi, catching a machete in the face for their pains. Same results either way, Hobb figured.

He grabbed the radio's microphone, thought about trying to raise the Agency. What was the point? All this shit would be over before reinforcements could arrive anyway. Instead, he made a call to Acheson, back at the team's base camp. No response.

That, Hobb assumed, was a bad sign as well.

He replaced the mic on its clip and went into the crew compartment,

stepping over bits of flesh and puddles of blood. Blair and Lovinger's weapons were tossed about, and, opening up a cargo door, he found a couple more FN MK46s. Those had already proven themselves useless against Jason Voorhees, however. No, Hobb wanted something that would do some real damage.

Slipping in a smear of blood, Hobb caught himself on a seatbelt and continued his search. Only Sisson had had one during the assault on Camp Crystal Lake, and Hobb knew there were several more—there ya go. Inside a storage compartment were three Milkor grenade launchers and two boxes of grenades. Hobb grabbed two of the weapons and the box of grenades. Busting it open, he loaded the Milkors, six grenades to a launcher. If that wasn't enough for the job, he was screwed anyway, so he left the rest of the grenades behind. Unlocking the rear hatch, he kicked it open. The massive metal plate fell to the ground with a resounding *thud*.

Kelly rounded the corner of the vehicle as Hobb was striding down the ramp, a Milkor clenched in each fist. "How did you know I wasn't standing back here? You could've squished me!" she shouted.

So much for the kick-ass *Rambo* approach, Hobb thought. He strode the rest of the way down the ramp, lowering the barrels of the launchers as he hit bottom.

Kelly eyeballed the weapons. "What are you doing? You're not planning on going back in there, are you?"

"Yeah, that's the plan," Hobb said.

"You're just gonna get yourself killed!"

"That," Hobb said, smiling at her, "is not the plan."

She stared at him. "Well, I'm not staying here."

"Good. I need you for bait."

Her mouth hanging open, she watched Hobb heft the Milkors, resting their considerable weight on his shoulders, and start walking towards Camp Crystal Lake.

A moment later, she followed.

TWENTY-ONE

Kelly couldn't figure Hobb out. On the one hand, the guy seemed cocksure and ready for anything, but at the same time he seemed to have absolutely no confidence in his ability to succeed at any given task. So why was she following him back to Camp Crystal Lake to play worm on a hook for Jason Voorhees? Because standing around by herself and waiting for Jason to find her was even stupider. Glancing across the treetops, she noticed a thick column of black smoke in the distance. "What's all that smoke?" she yelled, hustling out onto the two-lane blacktop to catch up to Hobb, who was already across the road.

"Main cabin's on fire," he called back to her.

As she hit the dirt shoulder on the other side she heard a car. A big car, like a truck. Or maybe even a troop transport bringing all kinds of soldiers with even bigger guns. "Hey!" she shouted to Hobb. "Wait up. Someone's coming!"

He paused, turning towards the road. "I hear it."

They waited, Kelly staring down the two-lane strip, trying not to jump up and down like an excited schoolgirl. When the truck appeared around the bend, her spirits sank into her shoes. Just an old flatbed hauling chickens packed into wooden crates.

She looked at Hobb, shaking her head. "Want me to flag 'em down anyway?"

"What for?" Hobb said, turning away and walking down the dirt road.

The chicken truck rolled by. Kelly waved at the old farmer perched behind the wheel. Then she followed Hobb, running to catch up.

"What's your name?" she asked, coming up alongside him.

"Hobb—not Hamm," he said.

"No, your first name."

"Walter. Like the guy who created Woody Woodpecker."

She looked at his shoulder where the grenade launcher was rubbing against it. His wound was bleeding worse now. "Want me to carry that?"

"Probably not a good idea," he said. "In case we run into trouble."

"Right. Got a girlfriend, Walter?"

"Wife. If she doesn't leave me when she sees how disfigured I am."

"What's her name?"

"Why? Are you gonna call her when I get killed?"

Kelly frowned. "I'm just trying to make conversation. And in the future, let's say 'if you get killed, okay?"

"Her name's Lauren."

"She must worry about you all the time, being in this line of work,"

Kelly said. She could see in Hobb's face that she had touched a nerve and regretted saying it.

"Yeah," Hobb said glumly. "Wants me to be a banker."

"That's hard to picture. And besides, banks get robbed."

"Good point. I'll bring that up in our next argument."

Feeling like she'd walked into a minefield, Kelly decided to end that line of questioning.

The two walked along in silence for several minutes. As they drew nearer to Camp Crystal Lake, Kelly's anxiety skyrocketed, despite Hobb's strangely soothing demeanor.

"I want to thank you," she said.

"For?"

"For killing Rickles."

Hobb slowed a bit, but didn't look at her. "Believe me, it was my pleasure. I just wish I could've..." his voice trailed off.

"A smart guy told me once that I shouldn't blame myself. Eats you up inside, he said."

"That guy was an asshole," Hobb told her.

Kelly smiled. Hobb's wife was lucky to have guy who could make you smile even with everything that was going on around them. Then she had a thought. "What about Father Long?"

"He's an asshole, too," Hobb said.

"Is he dead?"

"Don't know. There's always that hope."

They rounded the bend in the road, bringing both Crystal Lake and the campground into view. The lake was gorgeous, with sunrise glistening off its placid surface. The campground was another matter. It was still a good distance away, shrouded in the morning mist and obscured by trees, but she could see the main cabin in the midst of an inferno. Kelly fought the urge to take off running back to the road.

Perhaps sensing her frame of mind, Hobb spoke up. "When we get there it helps if you don't look directly at the bodies. Separates you from it."

"That's horrible," Kelly said.

"Sometimes it's the only way to keep from going crazy."

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No way in hell was Hobb going to let Kelly out of his sight. She had wept horribly as they walked through the field of corpses spread out across the camp's parking area, but she put up a tough front and soldiered through. Out behind the main building, however, in the campground itself, it had been a different story. That's where she saw a lot of her friends—people she had lived with and worked with—laid out on the ground where they'd been butchered like animals. Jason's work:

the Hand of God.

Hobb shook his head, appalled, but he never took his eyes off Kelly. He was hunkered down just inside the doorway of one of the cabins. He'd had to shove a body out of the way, and there were three more inside starting to stink, but he didn't want his back exposed. If Jason came after him here, it would have to be a frontal assault or the big bastard would have to smash through the cabin wall—and either way, Hobb would know about it in time to react.

Kelly, on the other hand, was out in the open, strolling back and forth in the area between the flame-engulfed main cabin and the others, trying to pretend the dead bodies didn't bother her, trying not to let the intense heat from the burning cabin drive her away. And trying to draw Jason out. Hobb was glad to see that she had listened to him and never got too close to the trees. The murdering madman had a knack for lunging out of any available greenery to pick people off, and he didn't want to lose her like he had everybody else.

Hobb wondered if Long had died in the fire. His body wasn't among the others. Of course, they hadn't searched all the cabins or the cafeteria yet, either. Hobb didn't think Kelly needed to suffer through that. Long could wait, Jason wouldn't, although he seemed to be doing a pretty good job of it so far. Hobb was beginning to sweat from the heat of the burning cabin. He could only imagine how Kelly felt, being much closer to the fire. He could see sweat glistening on her exposed skin, and her sundress was becoming remarkably transparent. If he was Jason, he would have come after her already.

Come on, you son of a bitch. Don't you want to finish the job?

Kelly shot him a look, both frustrated and exhausted. Hobb shrugged. Then he had what he figured was an incredibly stupid thought, but it worried him nonetheless. Jason Voorhees isn't like some kind of fucking vampire or something, is he? I mean, the guy kills people in the daylight, right? Christ. All he needed was to find out that Jason went off to some kind of secret ice-cave to sleep during the day.

Kelly started prancing around like a goofball. The pressure—hell, everything, he thought—had to be getting to her. Wait a minute. What was she doing? Hobb squinted through the heat, sweat stinging his eyes, even the one that was swollen shut. Kelly had slipped one of her dress straps down over her shoulder. As Hobb peered at her, she dropped the other one, then wriggled out of the sweaty, clinging sundress, letting it drop around her ankles.

Sweet Jesus.

At least she had panties on. Otherwise Hobb might have gone a little crazy himself. He had to hand it to her, she was really giving it her all. He watched, feeling more than a little guilty, as Kelly danced back and forth, fondling her breasts and apparently doing her best imitation of a

drug-addled teenager.

Suddenly, Jason Voorhees stepped from the trees on the lake side of the campground. Coincidence. Had to be. Hobb's hands clenched around the grips of the two Milkors. Kelly started upon sight of the killer, but held her ground, aiming her breasts at Jason and pinching her nipples.

Watch it, honey, I'm gonna have a hard time walking as it is, Hobb thought. All he needed her to do was lead Jason past the cabin he was hiding in, then duck into cover and it would be hamburger time. Jason lunged towards her. Screaming, Kelly took off running, just as the rear wall of the main cabin collapsed in her path. She avoided the flaming debris, but went way off course in the process, giving Jason a chance to close in on her.

"Fuck!" Hobb hissed. He watched Kelly racing around in confusion. Then she headed for the cafeteria, with Jason hot on her heels. "No!" Hobb leapt to his feet, trying to wave her off. "Kelly, no!"

She pounded up the steps and banged through the cafeteria door.

"No! No! No!" Hobb fumed. Not in closed quarters. How was he supposed to lob grenades at the bastard if Kelly was in the room with him? Hobb ran down the steps of the cabin he'd been hiding in, just as Jason entered the cafeteria. She was trapped in there with him. Hobb heard her scream. Sprinting towards the cafeteria, Hobb nearly stumbled and fell, catching himself by driving the barrel of one of the Milkors into the dirt. Recovering, he bounded up the steps of the cafeteria and ran through the open door. It took his eye a moment to adjust to the darkness. He could hear Kelly's screams, though.

Finally, Hobb's vision cleared. Kelly was at the back of the room, cowering in fear. Jason Voorhees was just striding past a mutilated corpse sprawled on the floor amongst the metal folding chairs.

"Jason!" Hobb shouted.

The killer stopped, slowly turning towards him.

"Remember me, buddy?"

Jason hesitated, unsure of who he'd rather attack first.

"That's it, come on over here," Hobb coaxed. "Kelly! Find a way out!"

Jason whirled, returning his attention to the mostly nude woman scurrying about in fear at the other end of the room. He started towards her.

"GET OUT!" Hobb screamed at Kelly.

She darted towards one of the windows and looked around for something to break it with. She settled on a folding chair. Jason was almost on her. The madman raised his machete for the kill. Hobb leveled the Milkors at Jason. He'd blow the son of a bitch apart before he'd watch him slice up that girl. Kelly smashed the window and tried to dive through, cutting her arms and legs on the shattered glass. Hung

up in the window frame, she was forced to wriggle out, slashing herself further.

Jason's hand closed on her ankle, but she slipped through the window. Furious, Jason spun towards Hobb, eyes smoldering.

"Come on, asshole," Hobb said, slowly backing towards the door. He needed to give Kelly time to get away from that wall.

Jason advanced on Hobb.

Hobb fired.

The grenade hit the floor near Jason's feet and exploded, sending up a shower of torn wood and hurling high-explosive ball bearings whipping through the cafeteria. Jason had disappeared in the fireball. Hobb was slammed to the floor by the blast, but quickly jumped up before the dust could settle. Jason was nowhere to seen. Surely he hadn't been torn apart by just one grenade? As the smoke began to clear, Hobb moved in closer. He tripped over something, tumbling to the floor and very nearly falling into a large hole the blast had opened up. He looked back at the object he had fallen over.

A severed leg, torn off just below the knee—Jason's severed leg. Hobb smiled. This just might work. He approached the edge of the hole, peering into a basement. And lying on the dirt floor, struggling to rise with only one leg, was Jason Voorhees.

But there was something else down there, too. Hobb stared into the gloom, finally realizing what it was. Bodies, piled like wood. Some of them were church folk, but among them Hobb could see Jeff Townsend's large corpse. Hobb stood, aiming the Milkors at Jason's thrashing body. "Sorry, Jeff," he said. "But I think you can dig it."

He unleashed another grenade. The blast ripped Jason's right arm off at the elbow which spewed blood across the dirt floor. Hobb fired again. This time, when the smoke cleared, he saw Jason's guts trailing from his midsection, tangled in his clutching hands.

Another grenade erupted from the Milkors. Then another. And another. Each one unleashing more and more firepower and inflicting more damage on the massive psychopath, tearing pieces from his body: a leg blown-off at mid-thigh; a chunk blown from his shoulder.

Hobb was there for what seemed to be minutes as he emptied the Milkors into the basement, blasting away until everything had been reduced to small, blood-spattered lumps. Incredibly, the hockey mask remained mostly intact. Wishing he had brought more grenades, Hobb waited there at the edge of the hole for a very long time, just to be sure nothing was moving. The air was heavy with charred flesh, spilled blood and burned cordite. He then threw the Milkors onto the ground and walked away.

EPILOGUE

Hobb had averted his eyes while Kelly slipped back into her dress. She seemed to find that amusing. Afterwards, they had taken a walk around Crystal Lake to the strike team's base camp. Hobb's fears were confirmed when he found the body of Acheson.

His entire team had been slaughtered.

Driving the LAV around to Camp Crystal Lake, Hobb was a little more cautious this time. But then, he could afford to be. He had completed the mission. Well, that wasn't entirely true. There was still one rather unpleasant task to be performed. Parking outside the cafeteria cabin, Hobb and Kelly had carried all the metal lock-boxes down to the basement, where they collected every single bit of Jason's shredded body they could find. Hobb's assault had blown apart some of the corpses piled down there, and when they found a piece there was some doubt about, they tossed it in a lock-box, too. Better safe than sorry. Then they did their best to wipe up all the blood, dropping the soaked rags into boxes and sealing them up as well.

The hockey mask went into its own metal box.

When they were certain they'd cleaned up every speck of Jason Voorhees's corpse to the best of their ability, they lugged the metal boxes back to the LAV and stacked them once again in the crew compartment.

Hobb slammed the rear hatch shut and locked it. Wiping his hands together, he turned to look at the remnants of the main cabin. The fire had pretty much burned itself out and the cabin had been reduced to a smoldering heap of ash and burnt wooden beams. Father Long hadn't been in there after all. Kelly had finally recognized the corpse lying in the cafeteria, but not until they were almost finished with their work. She had viciously kicked the dead man in his face, splattering her shoe with blood. Hobb thought he might have done worse, himself.

He turned to smile at Kelly. "Ready to get out of here?"

She nodded, too tired for anything else. They both slipped into the LAV through the driver's hatch, Kelly wedging herself into a seated position on the floor near Hobb. He guided the big vehicle around the wreckage of the main cabin and onto the dirt road headed for the highway. Kelly stared at the scorched school bus as they passed it. It seemed so long ago that she had ridden that bus into the campground.

They rode in silence for a time. Then, as Hobb wheeled the LAV out onto the two-lane highway headed towards town, Kelly leaned forward. "What do you think they'll do with this stuff?" she asked, nodding towards the metal lockboxes.

"I don't know," Hobb said. "But I'd be pretty happy if they put it on a rocket and shot it into the goddamn sun."